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BEYOND THE GREAT FIREWALL

Power & Paradox of China

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In this Issue

Editor's Note

DECYPHER

The Enigma of China

The tigers have a long history in China, the absence of tigers in China represents something far greater than a conservation case study. We can understand it as a manifestation of deeper tensions in contemporary Chinese identity—between tradition and modernity, indigenous culture and influence of foreigners, revolutionary upheaval and cultural continuity. To appreciate this story is to see past simple narratives of loss and towards the ways in which cultural change, political upheaval, and economic expansion have altered the relationship between China and its symbolic cultural heritage.

The tiger has, for over two millennia, been a deep motif in Chinese cosmology and culture. The meaning of the tiger, as part of a multifaceted set of meanings, structured Chinese understandings of natural order, political authority, and spiritual balance. The dragon and tiger pairing in ancient China represented two complementary forces—where the tiger embodied the dark, feminine energy of yin, but also embodied the masculine authority represented by the character for 'king' marked on her forehead. This apparent contradiction embodied the Chinese sophistication of thinking about the nature of power itself: true authority requires the combining of opposing forces, it did not mean one force exerting domination over another.

The development of Feng Shui as early as the second millennium BCE shows the depth of the tiger and dragon cosmology within Chinese civilization. Feng Shui translated literally as 'Wind and Water'—wind represented the tiger and water the dragon—structured everything from urban planning to burial practices. The tiger was not just a fearsome predator to be feared or admired. It was an integral part of the cosmic order that birthed Chinese civilization itself.

The arrival of Buddhism around 200 CE demonstrates Chinese cultural ability to synthesize narratives rather than replace them. Instead of replacing tiger symbolism with Buddhist teachings, Buddhism incorporated the tiger in its own narratives about multiple lives of the Buddha, particularly the story about the Buddha sacrificing his life to feed a starving tigress. This instructive tale illustrates something significant about how traditional Chinese civilization has approached new foreign ideas, not seeking to completely incorporate them or reject them, but instead to creatively synthesize the foreign ideas with existing, already developed cultural foundations.

Breaking this cultural ecosystem was initiated when China encountered Western imperialism in the nineteenth century, but the real shift occurred during the

revolutionary upheaval of the twentieth century. Both the Kuomintang and Communist governments, in different ways, sought to modernize China through a break from what they imagined were feudal traditions. Importantly, however, this modernization project relied on a significant contradiction: how do you build a strong, modern China with an unambiguous rejection of the cultural foundations that made China a special place historically?

The Communist project was especially radical. The declaration made during the Mao period that tigers were "pests" represented more than just a phase of environmental policy; it illustrated the determination of the Party to completely remake Chinese society from the bottom up. The complexity of traditional cosmology, which privileged balance and harmony with natural forces, was threatened by revolutionary ideology that purported to shape nature and society through human will and scientific planning. The tiger, a too-powerful cultural symbol to co-opt, and too inherently integrated in the cosmological model of cultural foundations to ignore, had to be eliminated.

The elimination of the tiger and tiger symbolism speaks to the complicated character of China's relationship with its own past. The Chinese Revolution was a movement that was, at one time, an anti-imperialist movement for the authentic preservation of Chinese civilization, but also a modernizing project which demanded a rejection of some aspects of that civilization. The tiger became caught in this contradiction. The tiger was a quintessentially Chinese symbol, but it too had to be destroyed to create a new China.

The environmental effects of this violent symbolic act became clear in subsequent decades. The way in which the Great Leap Forward attacked the four pests (rat, fly, mosquito, and sparrow) was evident as campaigns based on ideology sometimes had terrible ecological results. The Cultural Revolution's modern attack on traditional thought extended this ideology, because the attack on traditional culture targeted not just political opponents, but the broader framework of meaning that had culturally connected Chinese people to their landscapes over time.

Complicated does not only mean destruction, and even as the tiger's traditional symbolism was eliminated through a mix of ecological politics and revolutionary action, new representations of Chinese identity were also being constructed. The dragon, which, after adjustment, became more efficient for the state model, was preserved as the rehabilitated symbol of pride of the Chinese nation. Tactically preserving the dragon does reveal something about the pragmatic dimension of cultural policy. Some traditions could be preserved and repurposed, while others insisted on total rejection.

The present impact of this history reaches far beyond China's frontiers. As China has become a world power, the global conversation around cultural authenticity and national identity has intensified. The recent governmental focus on, ""cultural confidence,"" and its stated aim to revitalize traditional Chinese culture, are admissions of a deeper knowledge that sustainable power rests not solely on economic growth, but on an authentic cultural underlying.

Yet the project's complexity deepens with the absence of the tiger. How do you restore cultural balance when you have erased half of a cosmic pairing? How do you claim to represent Chinese civilization when you uprooted one of its iconic symbols? The awkwardness of these questions is helpful in understanding why environmental protection is such a sensitive topic in contemporary China - it unfolds deeper questions about cultural identity and requiring development.

The comparison with other Asian civilizations is insightfully instructive. Despite the brutality of the Soviet regime, a few hundred tigers remain in the Russian Far East. The mere fact that few tigers survive tells a story of their distinct place in Russian history and historical memory that shaped cultural perceptions of the relationship between tradition and modernity. The complexity of Russia's relationship retain some continuity with imperial memory; China's more radical break with its own tradition left fewer spaces for memory to survive.

This thinking does not mean that Chinese culture is completely erased from its roots. Cultural resilience often operates below formal government policy, in family traditions, local practices, and in popular culture. For example, the rise of traditional Chinese medicine around the globe, martial practices, and classic literature, show that cultural memory persists alongside historical practices, advances, and new policies are introduced at an official level.

Thus, the disappearance of tiger from China reveals historical transformation and loss. The historical loss represents the dangers of revolutionary modernization, but also demonstrates the creativity of transforming and adapting and continuing to shape a vibrant contemporary Chinese culture. The challenge for contemporary China is to find the appropriate balance and signaling to honor its past without becoming subjugated to it; to learn from the historical experience, but not repeat it.

Understanding this challenge requires us to move beyond simple questions of cultural 'destruction' and 'restoration.' It requires us to explore the practical ways that modern societies formally and informally negotiate the relationship between tradition and change. China's experience with the tiger, and the subjugation of the tiger, realist in both China's history, but also, and helpfully, in the transition, loss, transformation of cultural identity in its larger modern narrative.

The tiger may be gone from the forests of China, but its symbolic legacy remains embedded within the contemporary culture and consciousness of China. The things of contemporary culture, and especially of contemporary history, and how it is remembered, or retold, or discarded, or new meanings assigned, through the lens of historical memory and continues to shape China's meaning of culture on the broader world stage, of itself, and as a new place emerging in the modern world. The stripes of meaning may be faded, but the pattern it reveals of cultural complexity and the multiple identity negotiation either contemporary, or historical, remain as a cultural question as ever.

The Tiger is the perfect metaphor for China today, it is in direct competition with the United States, while trying to hold on to tenets of Chinese characteristics, something that is becoming harder to hold on to and define with broad acceptance even within China. The outcome of this struggle will shape not just China but also the vision for competing ideas of world order.

In this issue we take a closer look at China's inherent power and paradox by analysing the processes shaping it.■

Xi: The New 'Helmsman' in Profile

DECYPHER TEAM

Xi Jinping, 71, has established himself as the most authoritative leader of China since Mao Zedong, and holds unquestionable power over the second largest economy in the world and 1.4 billion citizens. Since taking office in 2012, Xi has transformed the domestic governance and foreign relations of China, completely centralizing power and implementing an increasingly aggressive foreign policy that has altered the course of global geopolitics.

China, under Xi's rule, is now a strategic competitor to U.S. dominance, and undermines the Western-led order in the world, including through shuttering innovations like the Belt and Road Infrastructure program, and bolstering its military in the South China Sea. Xi abolished presidential term limits in 2018, revealing his plan for unlimited rule, making him potentially the most powerful actor in the world in advance of global markets and security.

Current Positions Held By Xi Jinping

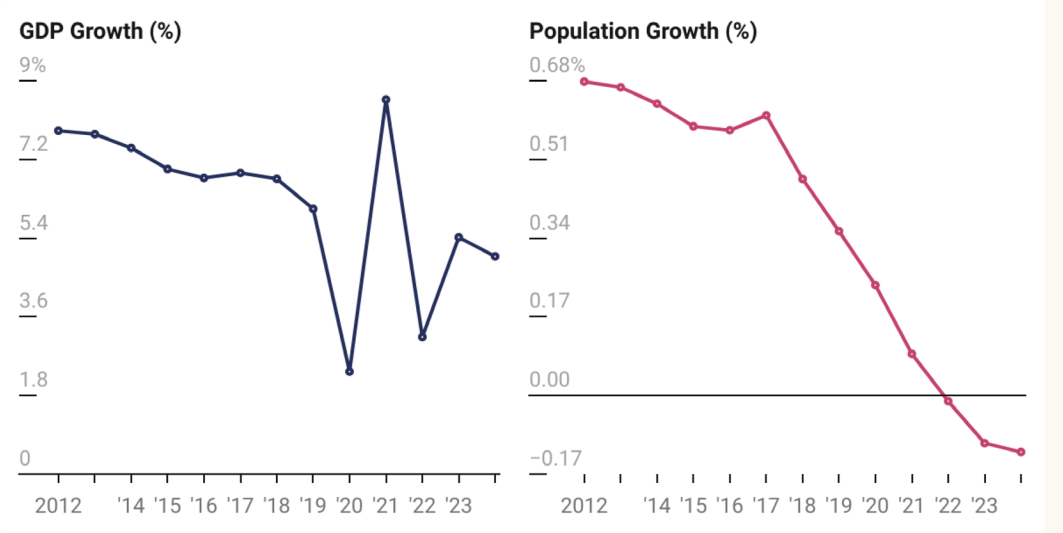
Key Positions:

- General Secretary, Chinese Communist Party (2012-present)
- President, People's Republic of China (2013-present)
- Chairman, Central Military Commission (2012-present)

Key Committee Chairs:

- National Security Committee
- Central Comprehensive Reform Committee
- Central Foreign Affairs Committee
- Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs
- Central Financial and Economic Affairs Committee

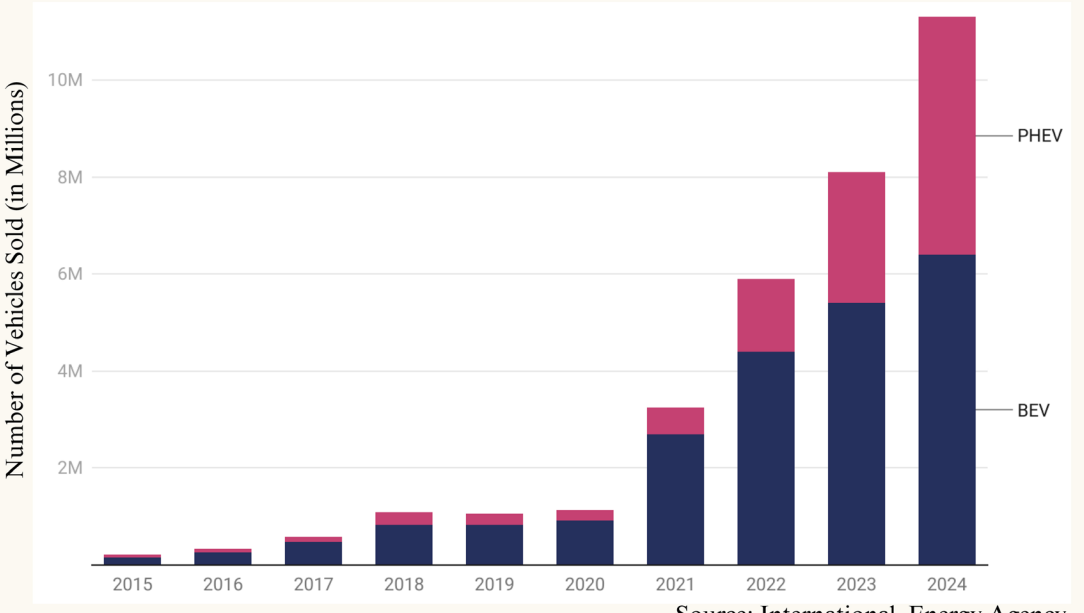
Trends in China's GDP and Population Growth 2012-2024



Source: World Bank

China's Electric Vehicle Sales (2015–2024)

BEVs are battery electric vehicles. PHEVs are plug-in hybrid electric vehicles.



Source: International Energy Agency

Career Summary

Earlier Career (1979-2007)

Xi's advancement in the ranks of China's political establishment took almost thirty years across several provinces. Having worked as personal secretary to Defense Minister Geng Biao, he built experience as one of the top provincial level officials in Hebei, Fujian, and Zhejiang provinces, and then served the short and sweet title Party Secretary of Shanghai in 2007.

Ascension to Power (2007 - 2012)

In 2007, Xi was selected to the Party Politburo Standing Committee, and over time, became Hu Jintao's heir while Vice President and oversaw preparation for Beijing 2008 Olympics, a watershed moment in international relations and China moving toward the global spotlight.

Rising to Power (2012 - Present)

Xi took Hu Jintao's baton as General Secretary of the Party in November 2012 and the President of the People's Republic in March 2013, signalling him to undertake a widespread and massive consolidation of power and reorganization of the governance architecture in China.

Major Developments

Economic Developments:

- Belt and Road Initiative - a $1 Trillion infrastructure scheme covering 70 nations
- Made in China 2025 - industrial policy aimed at achieving global primacy advanced technology
- Dual circulation strategy - economic model to reduce dependence on foreign economies
- Common prosperity - project redistributing wealth to diminishing inequality; varies

Governance Developments:

- Anti-corruption campaign- overreached; 1.5M officials had been eliminated from positions, even standing committee of the Politburo
- Military modernization- restructuring PLA and speeding up technology progression
- Surveillance state- total and pervasive social credit and surveillance deployment
- Rule of Law - emphasis on the law not the law through the rule

Market and Place / Business Environment

- Xi's policies have created a complex environment for investors and multinationals, in relation to (relative to those comparable national capital markets).

Opportunities for:

- 1.4 Billion - domestic market of consumers
- Leadership on EV cars, renewable energy, and cellular and next generation technology
- Accessing Belt and Road/ Infrastructure Packer deal type as global investment opportunity

Threats

- Increased state-centric economic and corporate intervention
- Ongoing regulator all out offensives against private tech companies and private education
- Increasing geopolitical tensions for supply chains
- 'Zero-COVID' (2020-2022)

Background - Xi

Family background

Xi was born on June 15, 1953, to Xi Zhongxun (a revolutionary war hero and Vice-Premier); Xi has a princely status and authority, Xi's family subjected to all suppression during the cultural revolution are outsized grasp of generational trauma; still has a hold in it. So, while the solidarity and trauma would have minimally passed through Xi's immediate experience contributes to thoughts and policy genesis

Xi had to take a break from his education at 15 in Shaanxi province, and spent 7 years of physical labor because of the cultural revolution; Xi points out there would be challenges and insights from definitions of common person and what the challenges and daily experiences were for rural poor people of China.

Education: Chemical Engineering, Tsinghua University, (1975-79); Doctorate in Law (Marxism) Tsinghua University (1998-2002, part time)

Personal Life- Married to Peng Liyuan, famous traditional folk singer, past major-general in the PLA, WHO goodwill ambassador. A daughter Xi Mingze, graduated in psychology from Harvard University.

Global Impact / Future Outlook

Xi's great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation to build the framework as sub-serving subordinate to the U.S. pyramids historic dominance. The "China Dream" is a vision to fulfill a "moderately prosperous society" hypothetically by 2049, 100th year of People's Republic; practically Xi goals involve a number of Xi viewed risks:

Economic and social stability - crisis and incipient existential economic and trade and investment unbearable

Taiwan military intervention - indications are toward military engagement as the hawks in the United States will have us believe, though there is no clarity from the Chinese state. Looking at the state of the Chinese economy, it might be deferred.

International isolation due to human rights violations in China on the minority population.

Succession is not clear and might lead to the confusion as it did post Mao Zedong's death.

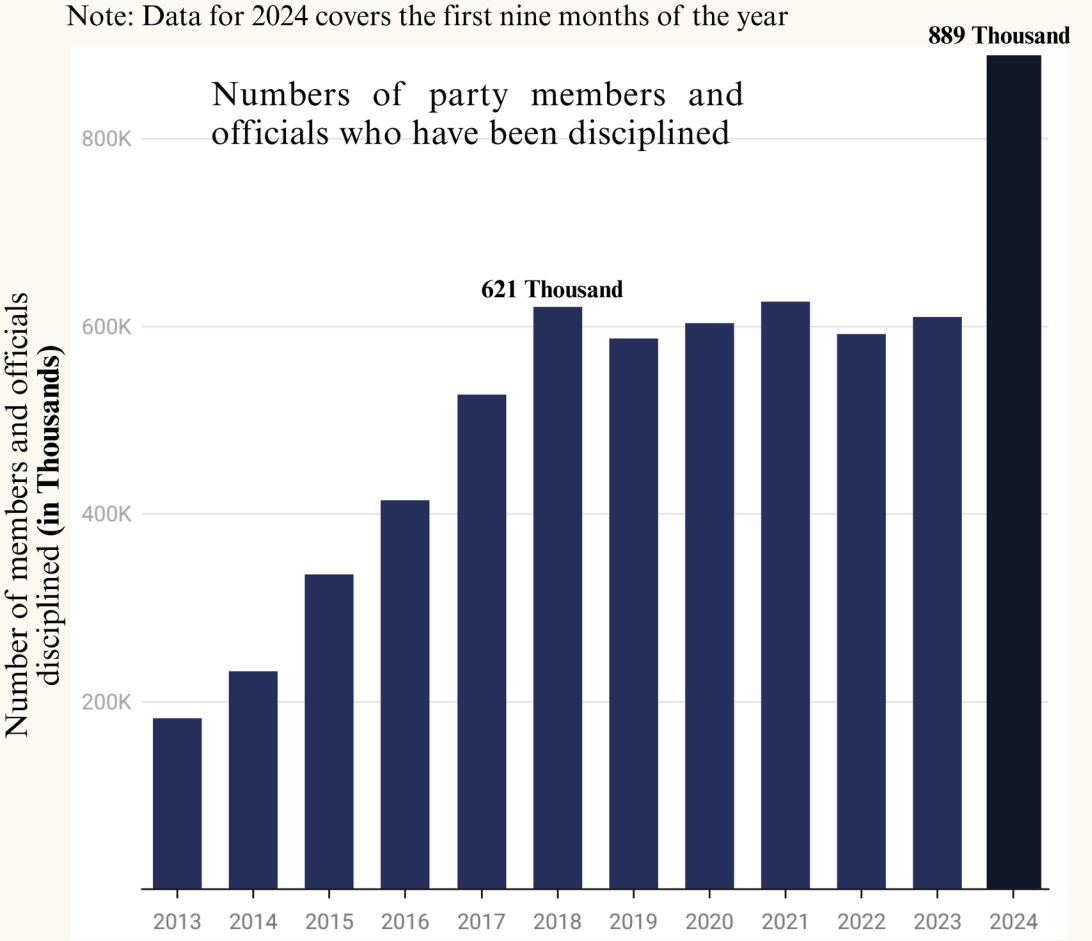
Overall Implications

Xi's leadership embodies a departure from liberal democratic norms towards authoritarianism and state capitalism - all of which present challenges to the democratic model. He is now impacting countries beyond his border with dollars, technology, and military reform, making him one of the key leaders in dictating the geopolitical landscape - possibly in the 21st century.

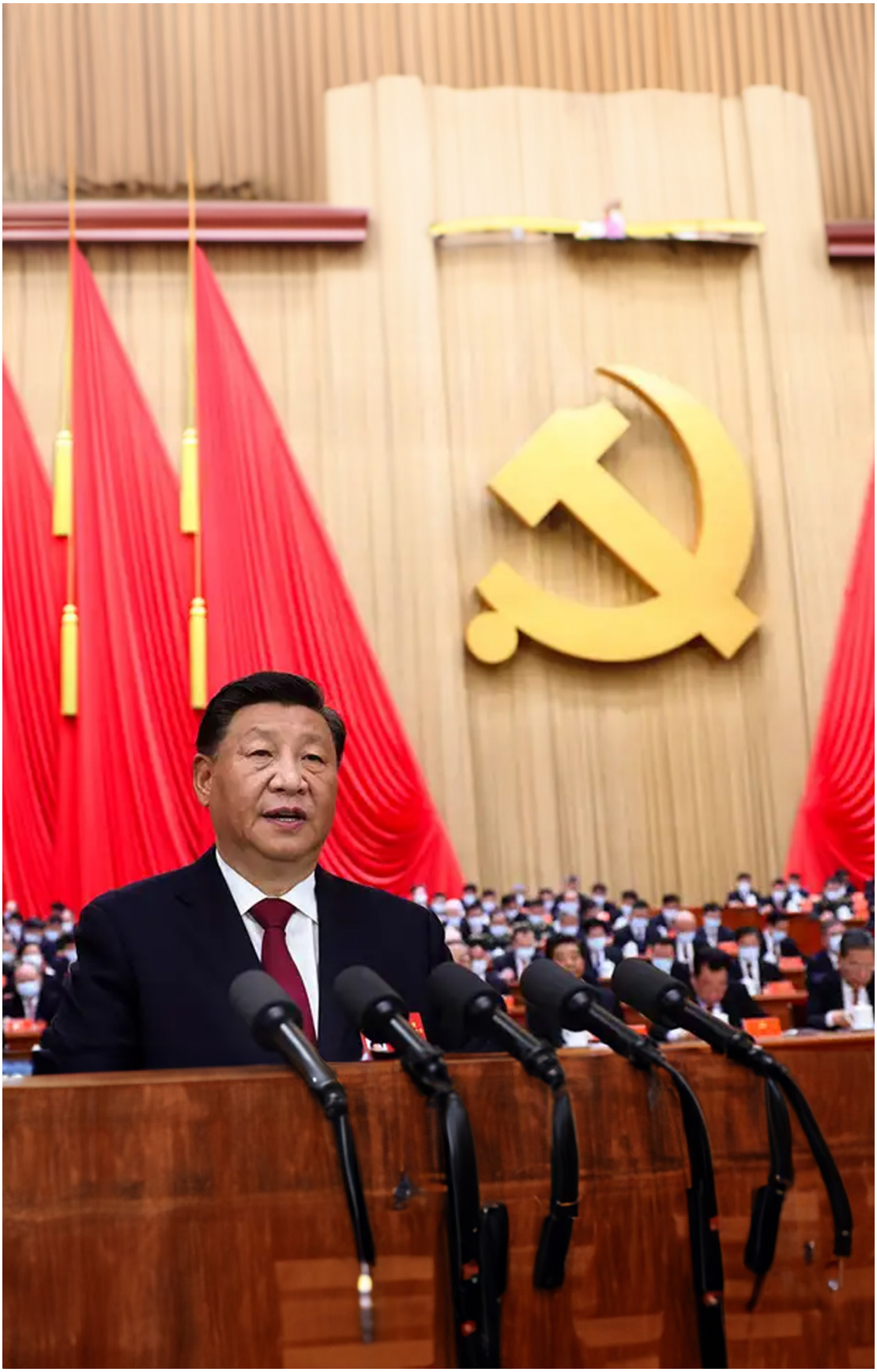
Without an appointed successor and constitutional amendment to allow for indefinite rule, he appears to be in a position to lead the country through 2032 and beyond, ensuring that his policies will influence global markets and foreign relations for multiple years to come. ■

The Rise of Disciplinary Actions in China Since 2013

Note: Data for 2024 covers the first nine months of the year



Source: Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), China Leadership Monitor



Decoding Hints that Xi Jinping May be Under Pressure to Relinquish Some of his Power

CHEE MENG TAN

Political and economic pressures might force Chinese president and overall leader Xi Jinping to delegate some of his powers to his deputies in a highly significant move. This has prompted some observers and media outlets to speculate that Xi's grip on power may be waning.

A major part of why this is happening is likely to stem from Xi's difficulties in dealing with China's economic woes, which began from a real estate crisis in 2021. For years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has relied on providing economic prosperity to legitimise its rule over the country.

But the continuously lacklustre performance of the Chinese economy over the past four years coupled with Trump's trade war with Beijing is making recovery a difficult task. And this is likely to be a factor that undermines Xi's rule.

These rumours about Xi started just after the latest meeting, on June 30, of the politburo (the principal policy making body of the party), which brings China's top leaders together to make major decisions.

For people who don't follow Chinese politics, the idea of Xi delegating some authority might seem nothing special. However, in understanding China, it's important to understand that Xi has massive power, and it seems the politburo is signalling there are some changes on the horizon.

What are the Clues?

Symbolism and indirect language play an important role in how the communist party communicates with Chinese people. The way it is done comes through slogans or key phrases, which are collectively known as "tifa".

This method of information is important since it shapes political language and debate, and influences how a Chinese, and international, audience understands what's going on. At first glance, the politburo's call for enhancing "policy coordination" and the

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"review process" of major tasks may appear to indicate that the central government is seeking to ensure local officials follow through with Beijing's agenda.

But there is probably more to the politburo's statement than meets the eye. The statement said that specialised bodies that exist within the party's central committee, which includes the powerful commissions that Xi's loyalists now hold, should focus on "guidance and coordination over major initiatives" and to "avoid taking over others' functions or overstepping boundaries".

For experienced China watchers there are hints here that this powerful decision-making body is making a veiled threat against Xi for holding on to too much power. But the opaque nature of China's elite decision-making process, where a great deal of backroom politics occurs behind closed doors, means that decoding its messages isn't always easy.

Because of all of this, there is increasing speculation that a power struggle is in progress. This isn't entirely surprising given Xi's purge of many senior party officials through anti-corruption campaigns and dominance over the highest levels of government is likely to have earned him many enemies over the years.

Another sign that all isn't going well with Xi's regime is the removal of some his allies from key positions within the government. Xi began his anti-corruption campaign in 2012 when he became China's leader. On paper, while officially framed as a drive to clean up corruption, evidence suggests that the campaign may have been used to remove Xi's political rivals.

The problem for Xi is that the campaign is being used against his loyalists as well. In October 2023, defence minister Li Shangfu, who was considered a Xi ally, was sacked due to what was later confirmed in 2024 to be from due to corruption charges. But the dismissals of Xi loyalists continued.

Admiral Miao Hua, who was in charge of ideological control and personnel appointment within the armed forces and Xi's associate since his days as a party official in Fujian province, was suspended from office in November 2024. And in June 2025, he was removed after being investigated for corruption .

The previous month, General He Weidong, who was vice-chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission, was arrested also for alleged corruption. Are the purges a consequence of Xi ceding ground to political rivals? This is a possibility.

But even if it weren't and the purges are part of a concerted effort to stamp out corruption, Xi's campaign will not only cast aspersions on his ability to appoint the right people into government, but also create a climate of fear among allies and potentially create further enemies. Either scenario puts Xi on the spot. But since Xi became China's head of state in 2013, he and his loyalists have taken over leadership of many key national commissions, making him the most powerful Chinese leader since the time of Chairman Mao.

These commissions include the Central Financial Commission, which regulates China's financial markets, the Central Science and Technology Commission, which aims to accelerate China's technological progress, and the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, which regulates China's digital content.

Who is on the Up?

But it looks like Xi is about to delegate some of his power, and there are some other decisions that may indicate a shift. For the

first time since coming into power in 2012, Xi skipped the annual summit organised by the Brics group (named after Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Instead, from July 5 to 7 this year, Chinese premier Li Qiang, led a delegation to Rio de Janeiro.

This isn't the first time that Li has represented Xi in high-profile conferences abroad. In September 2023, Li attended the G20 summit in New Delhi, India, and has taken part in Asean summits.

But the Brics appearance alongside with Li's increasingly prominent role in economic policy making may suggest that his influence is on the rise, while Xi's is declining. ■

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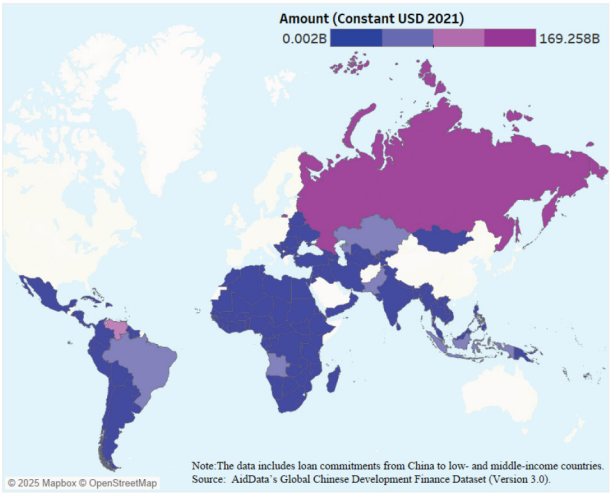
DATA TEAM

China's Global Loan Commitments (2000-2021)

Values in Constant USD 2021(Billions)

Russia received the highest loan over the 2 decade

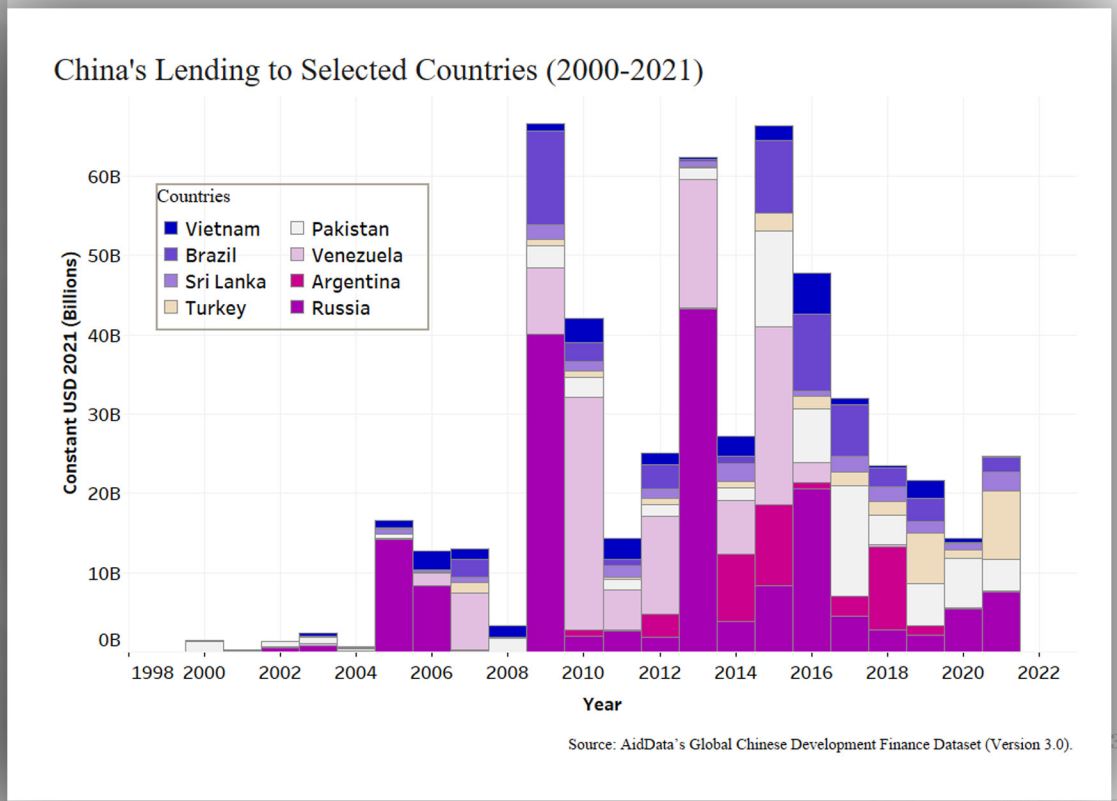


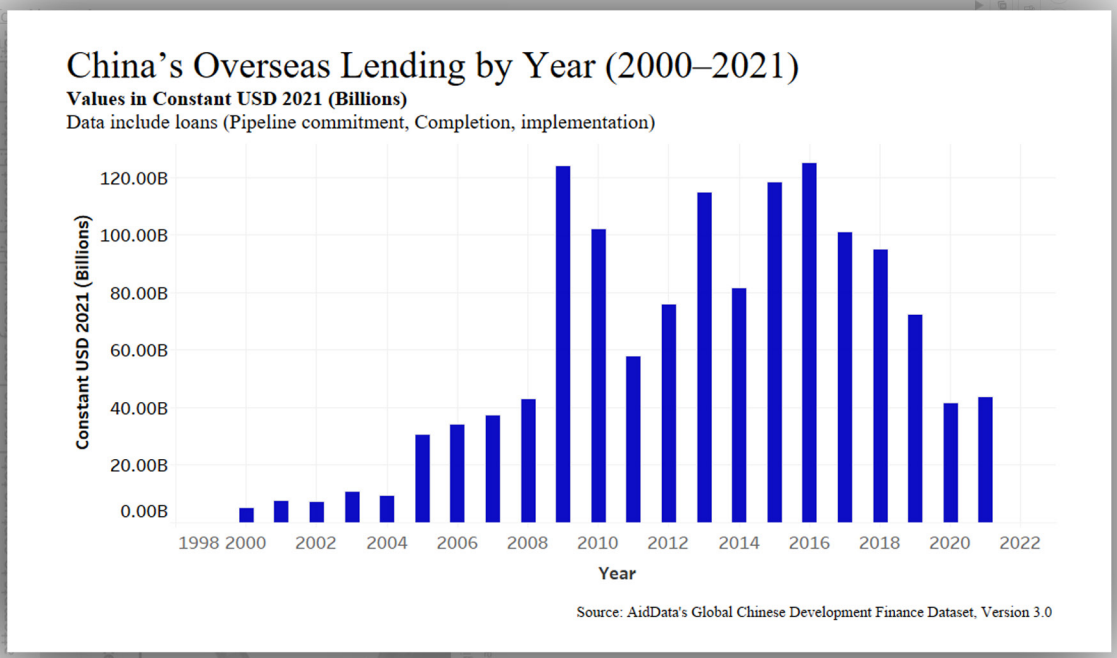
Note:The data includes loan commitments from China to low- and middle-income countries.
Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset (Version 3.0).

Top 10 Recipients

Russia	$ 169.3B
Venezuela	$ 112.7B
Pakistan	$ 68.9B
Angola	$ 64.8B
Kazakhstan	$ 63.9B
Indonesia	$ 54.9B
Brazil	$ 54.3B
Argentina	$ 37.7B
Vietnam	$ 28.7B
Turkey	$ 28.3B

Between 2000 and 2021, China committed $1.34 trillion in loans to low- and middle-income countries, with Russia ($169B), Venezuela, and Pakistan among the largest recipients.



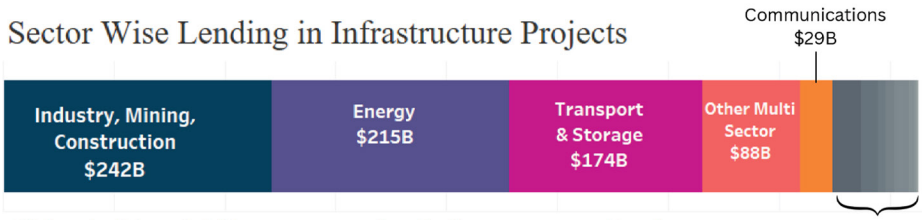


China's Lending Profile: Infrastructure Dominance

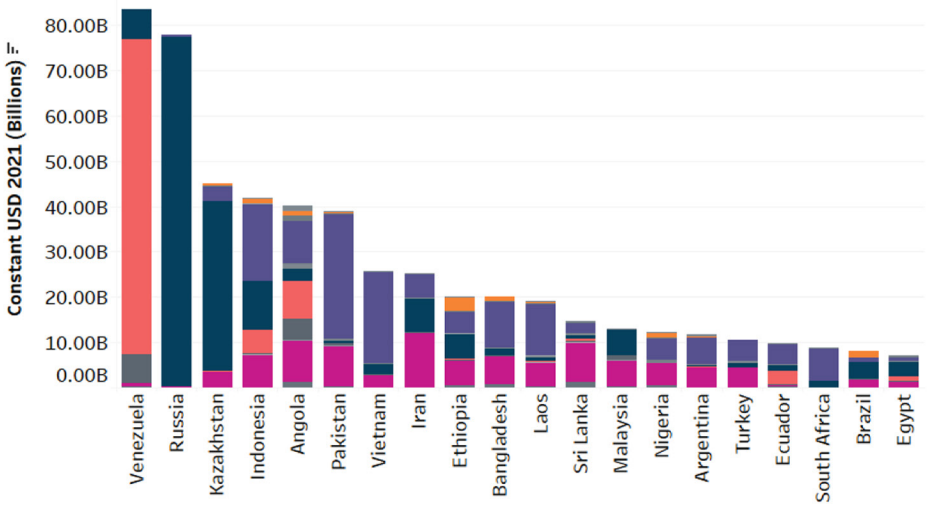
Infrastructure projects generally include those that involve physical construction activities (e.g. roads, railways, pipelines, transmission lines, fiber optic networks).

All values in Constant USD 2021 (Billions)

Sector Wise Lending in Infrastructure Projects

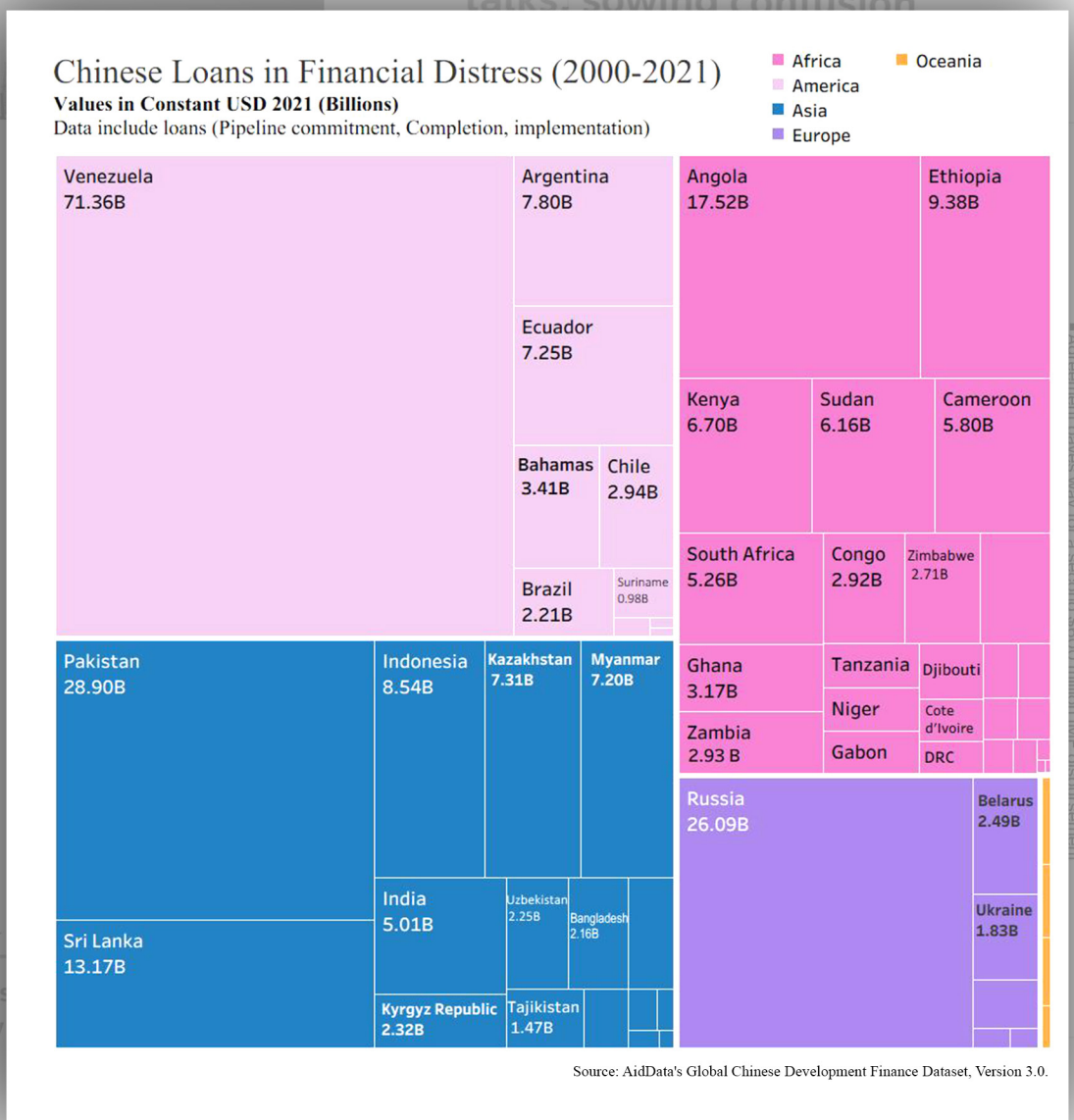


China's Top 20 Borrowers for Infrastructure Projects



Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 3.0

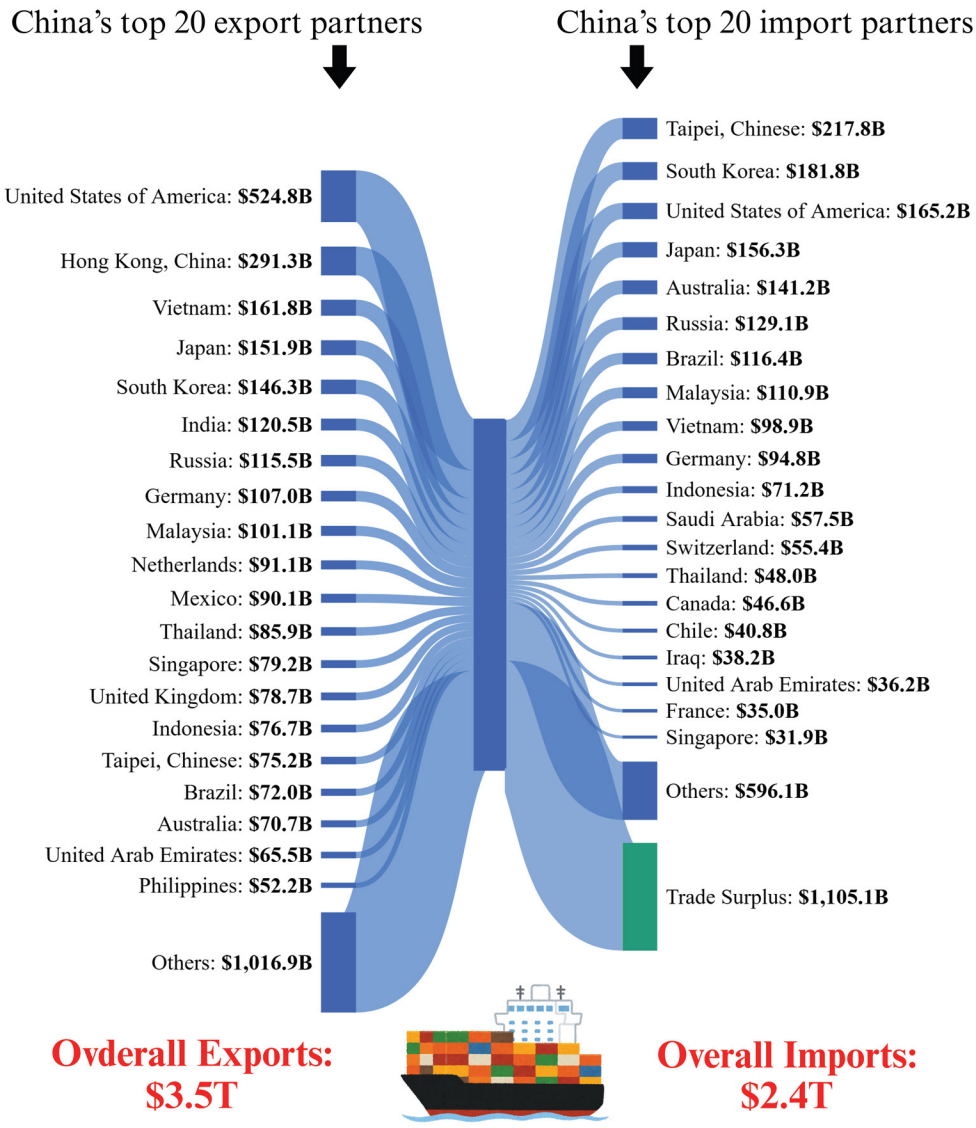
Several Asian Countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Iran, Vietnam, and Laos borrowed heavily for roads, railways, and energy projects.



Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 3.0.

China Trade in Goods, 2024

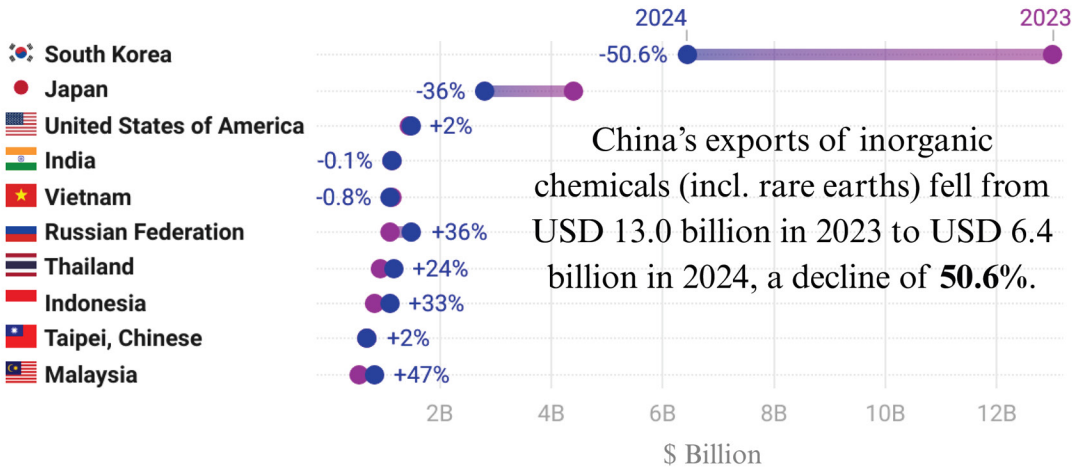
In 2024, China **exported $3.5T** and **imported $2.4T** in goods. The United States was China's largest export market, while Taipei (Chinese) was the top import source.



Source: International Trade Centre (ITC) calculations based on General Customs Administration of China statistics

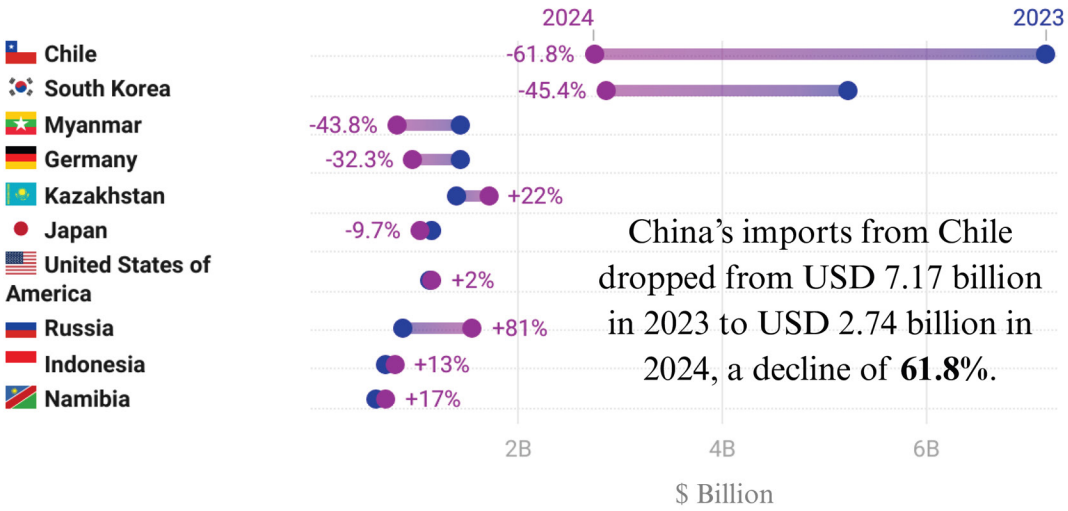
Rare Earth Mineral Exports: China, 2023–2024

Figure shows the % change in exports in 2024 compared to 2023. The selected countries are China's top 10 rare earth export destinations in 2024.



Rare Earth Mineral Imports: China, 2023–2024

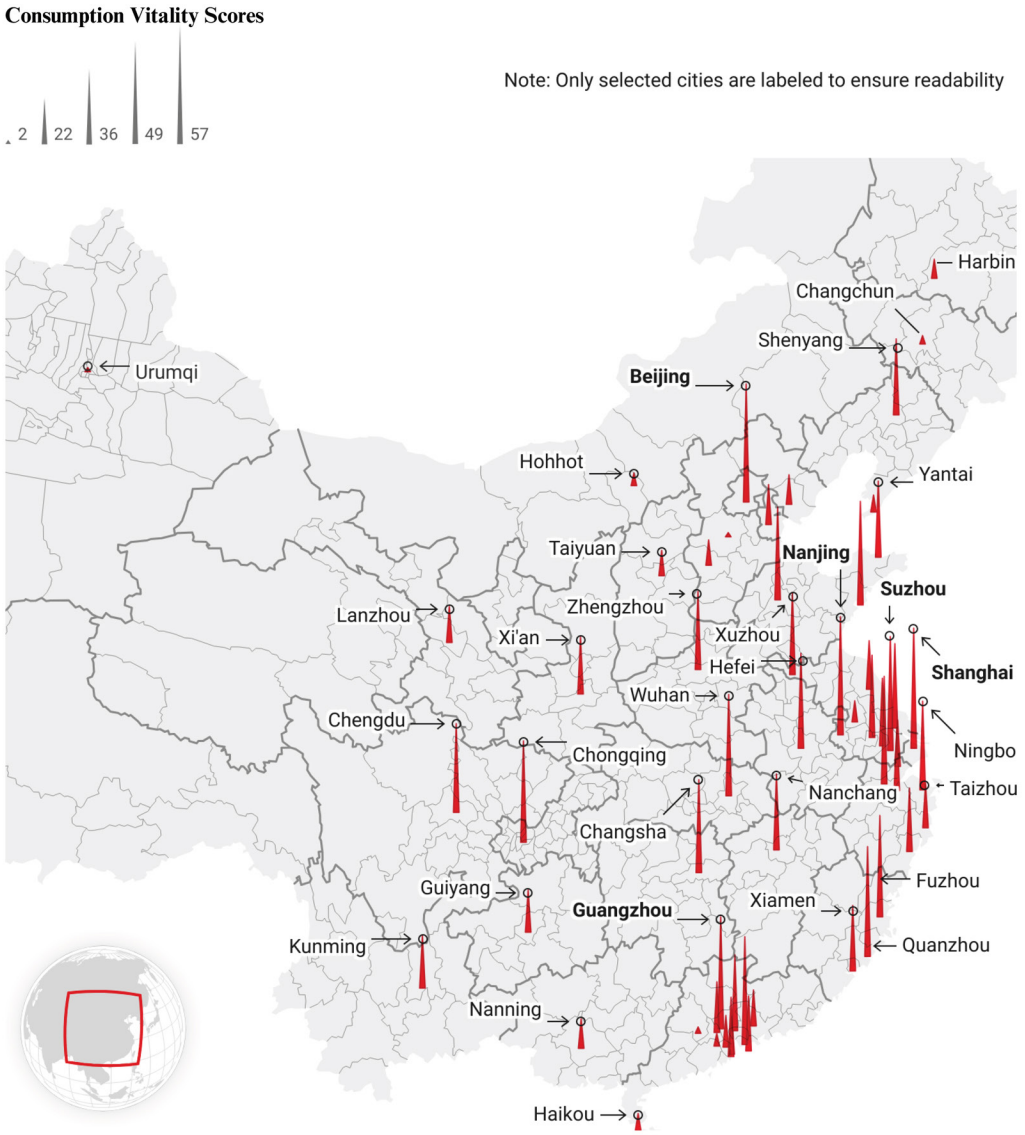
Figure shows the % change in imports in 2024 compared to 2023. The selected countries are China's top 10 rare earth import destinations in 2024.



Note: Data based on HS Chapter 28 (Inorganic Chemicals, including rare earth compounds).
Source: ITC calculations based on General Customs Administration of China statistics.

Consumption Centres in China

The report **"Cities of Opportunity 2024"** assesses 57 Chinese cities across a wide range of dimensions, from economy and innovation to sustainability and quality of life. One key indicator, **consumption vitality, reflects both the scale of retail spending and the potential for future consumption** by combining total retail sales and per-capita retail sales. On this measure, scores range from 1 (lowest) to 57 (highest), with **Shanghai** leading at 57, followed by **Beijing** and **Nanjing** at 56 each. A score of 57 shows the strongest consumption vitality among cities, while 1 reflects the weakest.



Source: PwC China & China Development Research Foundation, Chinese Cities of Opportunity 2024


AID

To Aid or Not to Aid: China's Rocky Road to Developmental Peace

MANASHJYOTI KARJEE

Peace has long been a contested concept in global politics. For the West, particularly after the Cold War, it meant elections, constitutions, civil society, and human rights. For China, peace is something else entirely. Beijing prefers the language of "stability" and "development." Its leaders describe their approach as "developmental peace," a model rooted in China's own history of lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty without liberalisation. The difference matters. In fragile states such as Sudan, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, Chinese engagement has become visible, even decisive. Roads, pipelines, hydropower dams, and mining concessions now dot regions once left to Western aid agencies and UN missions. But the outcomes differ from what Washington or Brussels expect. Beijing seeks order, not liberal transformation. It delivers infrastructure, loans, and diplomatic cover, but rarely conditions these on political reform. The result is often what might be called stability without liberal peace: temporary calm, sometimes in narrow corridors around Chinese projects, but little change in governance, accountability, or inclusivity in these regimes.

China's Idea of Developmental Peace

The term "developmental peace" emerged in Chinese academic and policy circles in the mid-2000s and has since been used by scholars such as He Yin and Wang Xuejun. It is based on three assumptions. First, economic development is the foundation of security. Second, peace requires a strong state that protects sovereignty and keeps the regime in control. And third, external actors should respect local conditions and avoid imposing political systems.

This is China's self-image. Officials claim that, unlike the West, China promotes peace without strings. Xi Jinping calls the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) a "road for peace." A 2023 government white paper went further, branding BRI a "path to peace," injecting "positive energy" into world development. By 2024, more than 140 countries had signed BRI memoranda, with over $1 trillion in pledged investments.

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Yet the practice is more complex. Recent research by Pascal Abb shows that BRI investments in conflict-affected states often have dual effects. On the one hand, they provide financing where no one else will. On the other hand, they risk stoking grievances over land grabs, elite capture, and uneven distribution of benefits. Yeonju Jung and Karina Shyrokykh, analysing 18 years of data, find that China's peace engagement correlates strongly with the economic needs of recipient states but less so with China's own resource interests. Security and diplomatic stakes do play a role, particularly near China's borders, but the overall picture is not just mercantile opportunism.

From another angle, Jung critiques developmental peace through feminist IR. She argues that China's model, much like liberal peace, remains state-centric and top-down, marginalising women, minorities, and local communities. What appears as an alternative is, in her words, "not substantively different." Developmental peace may diversify the field nominally, but it does not resolve the inequities baked into both liberal and authoritarian models.

Sudan and South Sudan: Oil and Order

Sudan was China's first large-scale experiment with conflict engagement. By the early 2000s, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) had invested billions in Sudanese oil. At its peak, 60 percent of Sudan's oil output went to China. Darfur's civil war and later South Sudan's independence threatened those assets and exposed Beijing to global criticism. Western activists even branded the 2008 Olympics the "Genocide Games" because of China's ties to Khartoum.

China responded pragmatically. It pressed Khartoum to accept a joint UN–African Union peacekeeping mission. It deployed special envoys and quietly lobbied rebel leaders. After South Sudan's independence, Beijing mediated oil transit disputes between Juba and Khartoum. When civil war erupted again in 2013, China contributed combat troops to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), its first such deployment, specifically mandated to protect oil installations.

The results were mixed. Oil exports resumed, Chinese staff were protected, and host governments gained breathing space. But neither Darfur nor South Sudan's civil war ended. Regimes stayed authoritarian, and civilians continued to suffer. The outcome was selective stability: peace around oil fields and pipelines, not across the country.

Abb's research notes that local actors saw this clearly. Khartoum and Juba both used Chinese mediation and investment to reinforce their own authority. Rebels accused China of shielding incumbents. China had become a conflict manager, but one whose priority was safeguarding its assets rather than brokering a political settlement.

Myanmar: Borders and Pipelines

Myanmar has long been one of China's most sensitive neighbours. The two countries share a 2,100-kilometre border. For Beijing, Myanmar is both a gateway to the Indian Ocean and a potential source of instability spilling into Yunnan. The China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), part of BRI, includes oil and gas pipelines, transport routes, and the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port. Many of these projects run through conflict-prone ethnic minority states.

China's involvement began with mediation. Beijing hosted ceasefire talks with groups

such as the Kachin Independence Army and nudged the government toward truces that would keep pipelines safe. For years, Chinese diplomats framed development as the path to reconciliation.

But when the Tatmadaw seized power in February 2021, Beijing recalibrated. It avoided criticising the coup, continued backing infrastructure deals, and coordinated closely with the junta to secure projects. Local militias and even some ethnic armed organisations pledged to protect Chinese investments.

The pipelines and ports survived. Yet Myanmar itself collapsed further into violence, repression, and economic ruin. Anti-junta resistance grew more intense. Protests against Chinese projects, from the Myitsone dam to copper mines, multiplied. Far from unifying, BRI often exacerbated divides by empowering the central military while alienating ethnic minorities.

The result is another example of selective stability. Corridors of calm exist around Chinese projects, secured by both the Tatmadaw and local armed groups. But the broader polity is less stable, more repressive, and more divided. China preserved order for itself but not peace for Myanmar.

Pakistan: CPEC and the Military

If Myanmar is close, Pakistan is indispensable. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flagship of BRI. Worth more than $60 billion, it links Xinjiang to Gwadar on the Arabian Sea. Two-thirds of CPEC projects run through volatile regions such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The stakes are high. CPEC includes highways, railways, power plants, and ports. Between 2014 and 2022, separatists carried out more than 30 attacks on CPEC sites. In 2021, a suicide bombing killed nine Chinese engineers in northern Pakistan.

China's answer was to embrace Pakistan's military. Special security divisions with 15,000 troops were created to guard Chinese projects. The military became CPEC's main manager, sidelining civilian authorities and provincial governments.

CPEC has delivered results. Energy shortages have eased, highways have been built, and Gwadar port is operational. But the politics are fraught. Local communities, especially in Balochistan, feel excluded. Protests highlight land seizures, lack of jobs, and environmental damage. Surveys suggest that nearly half of respondents in Balochistan believe CPEC benefits outsiders more than locals. Militancy has not vanished; it has shifted tactics.

Here, the pattern is again visible. Development projects stabilise key infrastructure and bolster the military regime, but they do not resolve underlying grievances. CPEC is a "fusion of Chinese developmental and Pakistani security-state objectives." The corridor functions, but democracy is weaker, and local resistance continues.

Afghanistan: Engaging the Taliban

Afghanistan has always been on Beijing's radar. The narrow Wakhan Corridor links it to Xinjiang, and Chinese officials worry about extremist groups using Afghan soil to target China. Until recently, Chinese investments were limited. But Afghanistan's mineral deposits, especially copper at Mes Aynak, have long attracted Chinese interest.

Even before the U.S. withdrawal, Beijing cultivated contacts with the Taliban. In July 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a Taliban delegation in Tianjin, calling them an "important force." When Kabul fell weeks later, China refrained from formal recognition but quickly sent humanitarian aid and vaccines.

The deal was straightforward: the Taliban promised not to support Uyghur militants, and China offered economic engagement. In 2023, a Chinese firm signed a $540 million oil extraction contract in northern Afghanistan, marking one of the first major foreign deals under the Taliban's rule.

This is developmental peace stripped to its essence. China did not press for women's rights, democracy, or inclusive governance. Its concerns were security and investment. Afghanistan gained short-term stability for its regime, not for its society.

The Data and the Drivers

The case studies point to a pattern: China intervenes when it has something to lose. Exposure and proximity are strong predictors. When pipelines, ports, or nationals are at risk, especially in China's neighbourhood, Beijing abandons its passive script and steps in.

Recent data adds nuance. A large-N study by Jung and Shyrokykh finds that recipients' needs also matter. Countries with dire economic conditions attract more Chinese engagement, even if they lack resources that Beijing covets. That suggests China seeks not just profit but also the image of a "responsible great power."

Security and diplomacy remain central. Conflicts near China's borders, like in Myanmar and Afghanistan, elicit more activism. So do cases where reputational costs are high, as in Sudan during the Darfur crisis. But across cases, one thing is missing: liberal outcomes. Using governance datasets like V-Dem, scholars find no consistent improvement in civil liberties or political participation where China is heavily engaged. Violence may decline around Chinese projects, but rights do not expand.

The numbers sharpen the point. Beijing now pays 15.2% of the UN's peacekeeping budget, second only to Washington. More than 2,500 Chinese troops serve in Africa, from South Sudan to Mali, the largest contribution of any UN Security Council member. These are not expeditionary combat units. They are protective deployments, often posted near oil facilities, bases, or key trade corridors. Still, for a country that once swore never to deploy troops abroad, the symbolism is striking.

The financial footprint is even bigger. By 2022, China had pledged $838 billion in BRI loans and grants, according to AidData. More than $100 billion went to fragile or conflict-affected states such as Pakistan, Myanmar, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Roughly 40% of BRI projects overall have landed in authoritarian or unstable countries, based on World Bank governance scores. This is not a coincidence. Beijing is moving where others will not.

Conflict data captures the mixed results. In South Sudan, deaths peaked at 50,000 in 2014. By 2017, after Chinese peacekeepers arrived, fatalities dropped below 15,000. That is real evidence of "negative peace" — less killing, but no political settlement. Governance scores tell the other half of the story: civil liberties did not improve. Stability rose. Freedom did not.

Pakistan's experience cuts the other way. CPEC, valued at over $60 billion, promised energy and growth. Yet ACLED reports an 80% rise in attacks on infrastructure in Balochistan between 2015 and 2021

compared with the years before CPEC. The corridor runs, but under siege. Public opinion mirrors the divide. Nationally, Pew found 46% of Pakistanis view China favourably, but provincial polls show 67% of Baloch respondents oppose CPEC. Roads were built, but resentment deepened.

The evidence is somewhat clear. China can reduce risks around its assets. It buys order in specific places. But the order it builds is brittle and uneven, delivering stability for investments, not necessarily for societies.

Domestic Drivers: Why Beijing Cares

It is tempting to see all this as foreign policy. In reality, it is also domestic.

Xinjiang looms largest. For Beijing, instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Myanmar is never just "out there." It is next door to Xinjiang, home to 12 million Uyghurs. The fear is simple: unrest abroad could bleed across borders, offering sanctuary to militants. Stabilising these neighbours is as much about domestic security as international order.

Then there are the state-owned enterprises. CNPC in Sudan, Sinohydro in Myanmar, PowerChina in Pakistan; these firms lobby for projects, win contracts, and pour in workers. Once exposed, they become pressure points. When projects come under attack, SOEs lean on Beijing to step in. What begins as commerce becomes geopolitics.

The Communist Party also has a propaganda stake. At home, "non-interference" is trumpeted as proof that China does not blunder like the West. Yet the same state media proudly highlights peacekeepers in Africa or envoys in Myanmar as evidence of China acting like a "responsible great power." Developmental peace is framed as both moral and practical; as a narrative that bolsters legitimacy at home while defending China's interests abroad.

And all of this is folded into Xi Jinping's ideological project, the "community of shared future for mankind." Stability abroad validates the Party's claim that its model of order first, development second, politics later is not just Chinese, but universal.

Rhetoric and Branding

Equally important is how China describes its actions. Beijing avoids terms like "peacebuilding" or "conflict resolution." It speaks instead of "stability" and "development." This rhetorical strategy allows China to maintain the fiction of non-interference, even when it mediates talks or deploys peacekeepers.

South–South cooperation is another trope. By branding its engagement as solidarity with the Global South, China presents itself as an alternative to Western paternalism. In multipolar forums, Beijing positions developmental peace as a corrective to liberal peace's failures.

Yet the local experience is mixed. Infrastructure can empower central elites while excluding communities. Feminist critiques highlight the marginalisation of women and minorities. Stability is achieved, but grievances fester.

Feminist and Post-Colonial Critiques

Scratch beneath the surface, and the model looks less benign.

In South Sudan, Chinese peacekeepers guarded oil sites. Women, meanwhile, made

up less than 5% of peace negotiators. The benefits of stability flowed to companies and governments, not communities or families. The pattern repeated elsewhere.

In Pakistan, CPEC created thousands of jobs, but overwhelmingly for men. Women remained in informal or low-wage sectors. Developmental peace, like liberal peace before it, has been blind to gender. It stabilises states, not societies.

Post-colonial scholars see echoes of an older story. The British built railways in India to move goods to ports. The French built roads in Africa to extract resources. China's BRI looks different in branding but familiar in function. Dams, pipelines, and ports often bypass local needs to serve global markets. Local agency lies mainly with elites who broker deals with Beijing. Communities on the ground are spectators, not shapers.

The critique cuts deep: developmental peace is not an alternative to liberal peace. It is a cousin. Both sideline the marginalised. Both privilege elites. And both risk hardening the structures that fuel conflict in the first place.

Conclusion: Stability Without Transformation

China has crafted a distinctive model of conflict engagement. It is pragmatic, interest-driven, and development-led. It provides infrastructure, loans, and diplomatic support. It uses persuasion and incentives rather than sanctions or conditionalities. And it consistently aligns with incumbents who can guarantee order.

The outcomes are visible. Violence around Chinese projects often declines. Regimes gain breathing space. Economies receive injections of infrastructure and aid. But deeper conflicts remain unresolved. Sudan stayed authoritarian until its own people toppled the regime. Myanmar's junta endures. Pakistan's military has grown stronger. Afghanistan's Taliban have been legitimised.

This is stability without liberal peace. It is peace for pipelines, not for people. It suits Beijing's interests and offers governments in crisis an appealing alternative to Western pressure. But it leaves untouched the grievances that drive conflict. And sometimes, by reinforcing elites and militaries, it deepens them.

Whether developmental peace can deliver lasting stability remains uncertain. For now, it delivers a narrow peace: corridors of calm, projects completed, regimes protected. For the millions living in conflict zones, that is hardly enough.

The harder question is whether this model lasts.

Short term, it works. Oil flows in Sudan. Pipelines run in Myanmar. Corridors open in Pakistan. But the long-term record is shakier. Sudan's regime collapsed in 2019 despite years of Chinese support. Myanmar's junta faces armed resistance even as it secures Chinese projects. Afghanistan's Taliban rule is brittle, propped up by aid and fear, not legitimacy.

The risk is clear. Developmental peace creates brittle stabilisations: regimes that look secure until they suddenly are not. They buy time but not trust. They deliver order for investors but not justice for citizens. And when they fall, they fall hard, dragging China's interests with them.

Beijing may find itself in the same trap as the West. Billions sunk into fragile states. Projects abandoned or bombed. Local resentment turning into anti-China politics. For now, China is still testing the limits. The question is whether developmental peace is a stopgap or a sustainable alternative. The jury is out. ■


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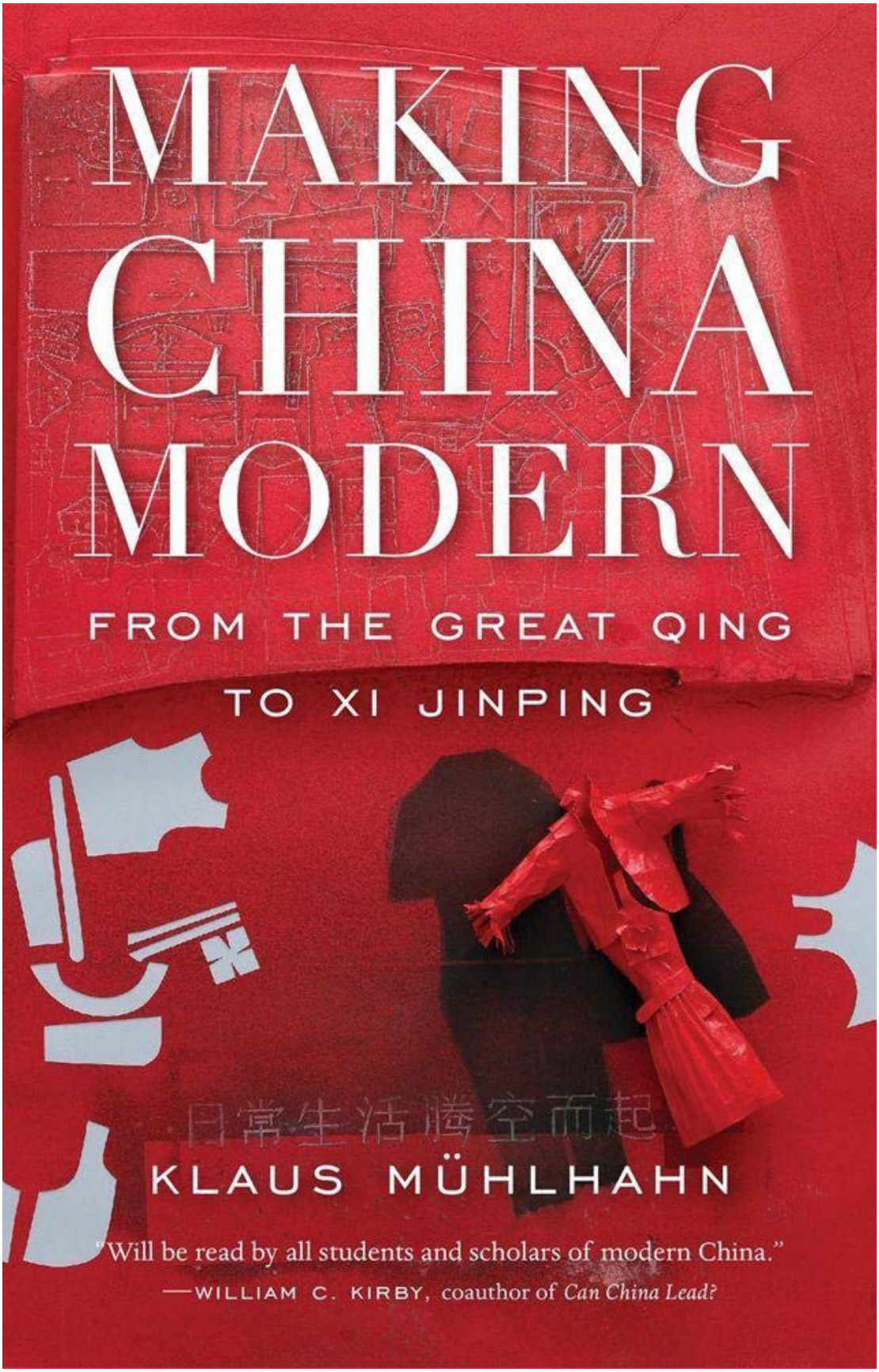
MAKING
CHINA
MODERN
FROM THE GREAT QING
TO XI JINPING
日常生活腾空而起
KLAUS MÜHLHAHN
"Will be read by all students and scholars of modern China."
—WILLIAM C. KIRBY, coauthor of Can China Lead?

The SenseMaker™

Klaus Mühlhahn is a German historian and sinologist specializing in modern Chinese history and culture. He has served as President of Zeppelin University and as Professor and Vice President at the Free University of Berlin. He is the author of Criminal Justice in China: A History, which won the John K. Fairbank Prize in 2009. His research explores China's political, social, and cultural transformations.

Amogh Rai

Welcome to Sense Maker, a platform where we try to understand complicated issues and have conversations that shape perspectives. Today we are joined by a noted historian of China, speaking to us from Berlin early in the morning. Thank you, Professor Klaus Mühlhahn, president of Zeppelin University and a leading authority on Chinese history and culture, author of several works.

The one we'll focus on today is Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping. Professor Mühlhahn, welcome.

Amogh Rai

Before we dive in, tell me as a historian of China: why this time period and why this book?

Klaus Mühlhahn

That's a great question. The main reason I wrote the book was to understand contemporary China. I believed it required a historical approach. Of course, disciplines like political science and economics contribute, but to grasp China's unique position in the world and its development, we need to look at history.

China has thousands of years of history, but to be precise, I felt we must go back to the 16th century, when many of the institutions

The SenseMaker Interview.

and structures we see today first emerged.

Amogh Rai

One of the striking features of your book is its non-linearity. While there's a chronology, the narrative also tracks institutions, not just individuals. It's less about leaders and more about how institutions rise.

For instance, you make an interesting comment about the gaokao—China's university entrance exam. You argue that this wasn't borrowed but rather drawn from historical precedent. Yet, despite centuries of upheaval, such mechanisms persist. How have Chinese institutions managed to stay true to form?

Klaus Mühlhahn

The institutions I discuss include the keju examination system for selecting officials, family businesses, state-related bodies, and mechanisms of economic policy, infrastructure planning, and investment.

When I say "institutions," I mean the rules that allow people to collaborate. An institution is not an organisation itself, but the underlying framework that enables cooperation and collective achievement. For them to endure, institutions need legitimacy, fairness, and some degree of transparency.

What is often overlooked in the West is how China's institutions have not only evolved and adapted but also demonstrated remarkable continuity. To understand China, one must grasp the weight of these institutions. They represent the ways China has confronted problems—often successfully, which explains their survival.

These institutions remain because they combine tradition with flexibility. They were accepted as fair and effective, giving them both durability and legitimacy.

Amogh Rai

Thank you for setting out that perspective—it opens up the discussion. Martin Jacques, one of the prominent commentators sympathetic to the Chinese system, has made a point you also reflect, though you approach it through history.

When we talk about the Industrial Revolution in Europe, we often overlook that China was also experiencing its own version. It was not machine-driven but powered by human labour and cheap technology, leading to remarkable progress in GDP and resource use.

Around 1751, under the Qianlong Emperor, China was at its zenith. Elites were well represented in the examination system, everything seemed stable, yet soon afterwards came institutional breakdown. How did a system that appeared so well-organised collapse? You suggest an alternative explanation in your book, which I hope will prompt listeners to read it in full.

Klaus Mühlhahn

Yes, this is a fascinating part of the story. As you say, the system worked very well then declined. Traditionally, Western scholars explained this as cultural essentialism: that the Chinese, bound by Confucian tradition, could not comprehend the modern world. I challenge that view.

Many in late 18th and 19th century China recognised that times had changed. They understood they now faced a West that was technologically equal, if not superior. There was a vibrant and sophisticated debate about how China might catch up.

So, it was not cultural stubbornness or blindness. The ideas were there, the proposals were on the table. What failed was politics. Elites were too concerned with defending their privileges, wealth, and power to embrace reforms. That unwillingness to risk their social position prevented meaningful change.

In other words, China had the cultural, economic, and scientific preconditions to thrive in the 19th century, but political failure caused decline.

And this is not just history. Even today, we see that many global problems stem from political structures and leaders unable to address challenges. For too long we assumed economic growth and modernisation would automatically create a better world. But in the end, it depends on politics.

Amogh Rai

Thank you. Let me take this in a different direction. I'm speaking from India, and both India and China share the legacy of colonialism. A key takeaway from your book is the "century of humiliation" in the 19th century.

China's experience of colonialism differed from other regions. Western powers—Britain, France and others—viewed China in contradictory ways, and Chinese elites responded differently as well. I'd like to hear your thoughts on the Jesuits, who had a longer presence in China than in many other parts of the world. How did they respond to the Chinese state?

Because when you read the accounts, China appears either as a wonderland or as the most miserable place on earth. Did that shape how the Chinese came to view themselves?

Klaus Mühlhahn

Absolutely. The Jesuits are an excellent example. They arrived in China early, during the Ming dynasty, in the 16th century. As you know, the first missionaries were not warmly welcomed by the Chinese Empire…

Klaus Mühlhahn

Remarkably, the Jesuits were not only welcomed but appointed to significant positions at court in Beijing and earlier in Nanjing. It is hard to imagine, for example, a European royal family at the time appointing an Arab or Muslim to government. China thus entered into intensive interaction with Christian culture very early, and initially the missionaries were relatively successful. Their strategy was to convert the elite first, later expanding to ordinary people.

Yet difficulties soon emerged. As Chinese scholars examined Christian doctrines more closely, they found contradictions with native traditions. From that point the emperors began restricting Christianity, even as it spread.

This exchange influenced Chinese self-perception. China saw itself engaging with Christianity on equal terms, not as inferior. This shaped a long-standing desire: to be part of the modern world and taken seriously, while remaining selective in adopting outside ideas. China never embraced wholesale imitation; it chose what suited its own needs.

Amogh Rai

That competitive perspective comes across clearly. Before we fast-forward to the 20th century and the Chinese Communist Party, one last question about this earlier period.

In your book you discuss religion: the rediscovery of Confucius, but also the growing interest in Christianity. There's an old saying that "the mountains are high and the emperor is far away." Without strong central control, Christianity found space to spread. At the same time, Confucius was being reinterpreted, with new meanings ascribed to him.

What, though, was the everyday hold of religion on ordinary Chinese people at this point? Historians often treat religion in China as an antithesis to the state. But your book suggests something different that religion was part of daily life, even if not the subject of the kind of great public debates seen in 19th-century Europe or South Asia.

Klaus Mühlhahn

That's an excellent question. Religion in China during the period I examine was extraordinarily complex. There were many popular traditions such as Daoism, and Buddhism, which had entered from India and Central Asia and gained a vast following. Confucianism, while perhaps not a religion in the strict sense, contained religious elements. Central too was the idea of tian, or Heaven, with cosmological beliefs about the universe, earth, and humanity.

This was not a coherent system but a mosaic of overlapping practices and beliefs. At times, religious movements even fuelled uprisings that challenged imperial authority. Into this already complicated landscape, Christianity was added, further layering the religious experience.

What I try to show in the book is that religion in China was not marginal, nor simply opposed to the state. It was interwoven with everyday life, shaping worldviews and communities, even if it lacked the central role that organised religion held in Europe or India.

Klaus Mühlhahn

What I argue is that traditions in China were never simply continued; they were constantly reinvented. Encounters with Christianity, colonialism, and other outside influences gave new meaning to old ideas. Certain strands of Confucianism or Daoism, for instance, became redefined as distinctly "Chinese," while Christianity, originally European, was adapted into the Chinese religious landscape.

This shows that traditions are not static. They change in response to new contexts and influences. Chinese intellectuals often mobilised cultural resources by revisiting their own heritage, reviving elements they considered vital in order to defend themselves against Western superiority.

Amogh Rai

You emphasise in your book that the Chinese never import ideas wholesale. They adapt and transform them. Staying with this theme, let's talk about how elites viewed industrialisation. By the late Qing, moving into the Sun Yat-sen era and the 1911 revolution, China had long been central to global commerce. Yet, as you note, there was a certain comic misunderstanding of modern industry.

What did you see in the archives about how industrialisation was perceived? Did it make sense to Chinese elites, or was it something they resisted?

Klaus Mühlhahn

That's a very interesting question. When we

talk about "China" we must remember it was never homogeneous. Even in the early 20th century it had 500–600 million people, with very diverse experiences.

Responses to industrialisation varied by group. Those in traditional occupations often resisted. The transportation sector, for example, was vast and sophisticated: canals full of boats, urban carriers moving heavy loads, tricycles and bicycles everywhere. When railways and steamships arrived, these groups saw them as threats to their livelihoods. Protests against railway construction were common.

Merchants, however, viewed industrialisation as an opportunity. They explored importing and even building machines themselves. They experimented with producing electricity, investing in new ventures, and adapting Western technology for local use. Many were extremely successful, both in business and in driving industrial development.

The state also had its own motives. The government recognised military inferiority and saw Western technology as vital to strengthening national defence. Industrialisation was thus pursued not just for commerce, but for survival as a modern power.

So, the reactions ranged from resistance to enthusiastic adoption. The merchants, in particular, proved adept at seizing opportunities, learning from the West while reshaping technologies for the Chinese context.

Amogh Rai

In 2019, I first read your work in ChinaFile, where you wrote about the unfulfilled promise of the May Fourth Revolution. Five years on, after Covid lockdowns and the White Paper protests, your point remains relevant. You noted that 1989 was, in many ways, a continuation of 1919—that ideas of liberty and equality were never forgotten.

By 1919, the Qing dynasty had collapsed, Sun Yat-sen had come and gone, and instability prevailed. What did modernity mean to students, workers, and elites at that time?

Klaus Mühlhahn

Excellent question. Industrialisation was, of course, part of what Chinese intellectuals understood as modernity. In the 1910s and 1920s, the first science fiction stories appeared, reflecting fascination with technological progress.

For many, modernity meant joining the modern world on equal terms. The May Fourth Movement signalled that students and thinkers wanted to participate in shaping this new order. They refused to accept exclusion.

But there was another layer: the political promise of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, solidarity, and self-determination. This was about building a more egalitarian society where people had a greater say in national affairs.

So, modernity meant two things: industrial and technological progress, and political transformation. These aspects were not identical, but both animated young people, including the Tiananmen protesters of 1919.

Amogh Rai

That also challenges the claim that China was isolated from global currents. As you

write, 1919 was a period when ideas flowed in from across the world, reshaping Chinese thought. You argue that Chinese identity and traditions evolved in their own rhythm rather than being passively imposed from outside.

This brings me to the question of elites. Colonised countries often saw the creation of new elites who bridged vernacular traditions with colonial languages. In India, for example, after 1858 a new elite emerged fluent both in English and local languages.

In China, something similar happened but on a much smaller scale. What fascinates me is how the Chinese language survived repeated colonial pressures. Despite interventions from five different foreign powers, the language remained resilient. Newspapers and new stories could rise or fall, but the language itself followed its own trajectory.

You've written on this—how did the language endure so strongly?

Klaus Mühlhahn

I agree, this is remarkable. Compared with Africa, India, or Latin America, China was never fully colonised. That difference is crucial.

Klaus Mühlhahn

Colonial influence in China was mostly limited to the coastal cities such as Shanghai, Canton, or Tianjin. The vast rural hinterland, where the majority of people lived, was largely untouched. Some estimates suggest that 80–85% of Chinese never had any direct contact with Westerners.

This partial colonisation mattered. Mao Zedong described China as a "semi-colonial" country. That status allowed China to preserve traditions—its language, family structures, and rural culture—which might otherwise have been eroded.

Amogh Rai

Yes, and the archives must be fascinating for tracing this story. One fact from your book surprised me. In the 1920s and 1930s, under Chiang Kai-shek, there was real co-development with Western organisations like the Rockefeller Foundation. There was steady growth, even as Japan became aggressive.

Why do we rarely hear about this? Until reading your book, I assumed 1911 to 1949 was simply decades of chaos and desolation. Yet you describe flights, air travel, roads, and cars appearing. Why does this period get erased in much contemporary writing?

Klaus Mühlhahn

Partly because after 1949 the Communist government had no interest in giving credit to its predecessor. Official historiography painted the 1920s, 30s, and 40s as a dark age. But that is misleading.

The Nationalist regime under Chiang Kai-shek did achieve a great deal. Their initiatives created foundations on which the Communists later built. This was a remarkable period of transformation. It is important to recognise that the outcome of the civil war was not inevitable. The Nationalists had successes, but they made critical mistakes on the battlefield, which cost them victory. Their defeat was military, not proof that their policies were doomed from the outset.

Many of their economic and social reforms were later continued by the Communists.

Amogh Rai

That is striking, both because this growth occurred, and because it has been largely forgotten. If we turn to the civil war: between 1939 and 1945 the Communists and Nationalists united to fight Japan. Before and after, however, the Communists controlled the countryside while the Nationalists held the cities.

One question: Mao Zedong was not always the natural leader of the Communist Party. His rise came through the Long March and later consolidation. Who were the other figures in Communist history who deserve attention, but who have since been lost in Mao's shadow?

And, linked to this, how do we understand Sun Yat-sen's influence—not just on the Communists and Chiang Kai-shek, but also on today's Taiwanese politics?

Klaus Mühlhahn

Sun Yat-sen's influence was immense. His ideas, particularly around industrialisation, the economy, and what he called "people's livelihood"—raising living standards, ensuring fairness, ending poverty and exploitation—resonated deeply. These principles shaped both Communist and Nationalist policies, leaving a legacy still visible in Taiwan today.

Klaus Mühlhahn

There are clear similarities between the Nationalists and the Communists. Their ideologies differed, but in practice some policies overlapped.

As to your question—who really made up the Communist Party? We all know Mao, but the story is more complicated. From the beginning, Mao argued that Marxism had to be adapted to Chinese conditions. His great contribution was the insight that Western revolutionary strategy—relying on an industrial working class—would not work in China. There was no sizeable proletariat. Instead, he mobilised peasants.

This was transformative. By shifting the revolutionary base from workers to peasants, Mao changed the nature of communism in China. The Red Army was not a disciplined industrial force but a rough coalition of landless peasants, impoverished farmers, and outcasts who saw the movement as a path out of misery. This made the Chinese revolution far messier than its European counterparts.

Beyond Mao, there were many others leaders who played vital roles but are often forgotten in official histories. They were the driving force of the movement, even if today their names rarely appear outside archival lists.

Amogh Rai

That leads me to combine two questions about the Mao era, from 1949 to his death in 1976. Mao became China's supreme leader, initially looking to Stalin as a mentor, but later building a cult of his own. Yet there were others in the Party—better educated, some trained in Paris—who might have led. Why was Mao never successfully opposed?

Klaus Mühlhahn

We shouldn't assume there was no opposition. There was, and quite a lot. But in China's political system such conflicts were hidden. Access to archives from the 1950s is limited, yet evidence suggests there were constant debates and challenges to Mao's authority. He reacted fiercely to these, which contributed to the launch of the Cultural Revolution—his attempt to purge rivals and reassert dominance.

So while Mao appears unchallenged in retrospect, the reality was a continual back-and-forth, with disputes and rival visions within the leadership.

Amogh Rai

Yes, and as you show, each time opposition arose, Mao reached out dramatically to the people, almost like the emperors you describe earlier in your book.

Let me ask about the state. China has always had a powerful central state. Under Mao, this was reinforced through state-owned enterprises (SOEs). These were not a Communist invention—you note they existed under Chiang Kai-shek too. But Mao's SOEs, along with the "iron rice bowl," provided stability and control: guaranteed jobs, housing, and welfare in exchange for loyalty and productivity.

This compact was shattered in the 1980s, but under Xi Jinping there is an effort to restore aspects of it, reviving the state's role in the economy.

Amogh Rai

But Xi Jinping does not have the promise or aura that Mao carried. Where do you see the modern Chinese state headed, based on history? I know it's a speculative question, but I must ask.

Klaus Mühlhahn

Indeed. The modern Chinese state is torn between two imperatives. On one hand, it seeks to guarantee citizens a decent living eliminating poverty and ensuring everyone enjoys a minimum standard of life. On the other, it must succeed in a global capitalist system to generate the wealth needed to fulfil that promise.

This was where Mao failed. Under him, the "iron rice bowl" provided guarantees, but the bowl was empty. When I first travelled to China in the early 1980s, people still used ration coupons for rice and meat, but portions were so small they could barely survive.

So the dilemma remains: to provide social welfare, China must thrive in the global market. But these are two different logics—equality versus growth. The unresolved question is which takes priority: welfare and equality, or continued economic expansion.

Amogh Rai

Professor, it has been a fascinating discussion. This is a book I've read once, but I know I'll return to. It's well-thumbed—my first edition from India. Before we end, one final question.

When I began studying China around 2012, I saw a country that had risen to middle-income status and looked confident. Yet inside China, the conversation was surprisingly negative. Bestseller titles proclaimed "China Stands Up," but by the 2010s, gloom had set in.

Is this pessimism rooted in the "century of humiliation," or is it cultivated by the Communist Party to remind people it alone safeguards national security? Where does this sense of doom come from, and how do you see the next decade?

Klaus Mühlhahn

Your question has many layers. Globally, we are in a time of shifts. Countries like India and China rightly demand greater access to resources and influence. For centuries,

the West consumed the lion's share and enjoyed the highest living standards. That arrangement cannot continue.

China's recent confidence is grounded in its economic success, and it will continue to demand a greater voice. But history suggests such transitions are rarely peaceful. Established powers seldom make space voluntarily for new players. Unfortunately, I foresee more conflicts as competition for limited resources—water, clean air, sustainable growth—intensifies.

The coming decade will be marked by instability. The rules of the global order are uncertain, and China will persist in asserting what it considers its rights. Its growing weight makes this unavoidable.

Amogh Rai

Thank you very much, Professor. That was my final question. ■


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Adrift and in Exile Within: The Lived Experience of China's Migrant Workers

T.G. SURESH

Introduction

The social history of China, since the fall of the Qing dynasty, has not progressed along predictable trajectories. At periodic intervals, there have been societal inflections marked by a change of course towards a different future. Like in the early 1980s when a seemingly stable and long-existing social arrangement known as socialism began to dissolve. Most notably, the dismantling of the rural communes, which until the late 1970s held back the peasant population in the countryside by providing them home, livelihood, and a familiar social world. But the gradual disintegration of the socialist-era planning institutions, which began earlier in the rural areas as manifested in the breakdown of rural communes, created a new set of social realities. With the government's attempt to introduce agriculture-based economic solutions, such as the household responsibility system, failing, China's agrarian social world was all set for a structural change. The most noticeable among these changes was the emergence of a new class of Chinese proletariat called the migrant workers (nongmingong), unattached to the rural economy, who moved out of the rural areas and entered the cities for employment, mostly without the state sanction. Their collective breach of the state regulatory regime on rural-urban migration, the hukou system, and the social and economic outcome it produced is a fascinating, yet poignant story of China's ever-changing historical courses.

The rural counties in post-socialist China of the 1980s were a harsh place to live in. For many rural residents, therefore, to survive amidst the grinding scarcities meant leaving the villages to become itinerants, or in other words, migrate to the cities and find employment. Be it in construction sites, factories, warehouses, or repair shops, they were driven by the desire to find cash wages. In the 1990s, when China was emerging as the 'factory of the world' driven by Foreign Direct Investments in the Pearl River Delta towns in southeastern Guangdong province, the cities of Shenzhen, Dongguan, Zhuhai, Foshan and Jiangmen became attractive

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destinations for rural migrants. Thus began one of the largest internal migrations in history. By the late 1990s, an estimated 200 million rural peasants left their home villages and counties to enter the cities to work in non-agricultural industries.

The story of China's migrant workers has been well written about. There exist both in Chinese as well as in English rich ethnographic narratives, labour market studies, statistical accounts, and official documents. Besides, the migrants' world of labour and personal lives has inspired many literary expressions in the form of novels, autobiographical narratives in social media, documentaries, television dramas, and well-known films. Drawing from some of these sources, I try to reconstruct some aspects of their lived experiences. This article elaborates on four issues that I consider as the defining conditions of rural migrants' life worlds. The first is migration. In China, the processes of leaving the rural areas and entering the cities for employment is not an exercise of free will. It entails negotiations as well as evasion of the state sanctioning regime of the hukou system, which continues to cast a long shadow over the lives of rural migrants. Secondly, the lifeworld of migrants in the cities is confined to territorial bounding, as their accommodation in workers' dormitories has integrated worksite and housing that denies them mobilities. As newcomers to the cities, the migrants typically suffer from a sense of loss of belonging. This aspect of how they are coping with the longing for a community and social fraternities by tapping into native-place affinities is elaborated in the third section. A tragic part of migrants' life is the non-payment of wages after long months of toil in the construction sites and export industries. The last section will examine the recurring issue of wage arrears that has left millions of migrant workers devastated. The concluding section will be a note of postscript to reflect upon the current update on whether the migrant workers' life has changed, and if so, how far.

The lives of China's migrant workers are stories of human resilience. A majority of them were forced to endure conditions that demanded extreme perseverance in an unfamiliar social milieu, where they found themselves in the cities. In many ways, the migrant workers' life has a poignant semblance to the characters portrayed in Jia Zhangke's film Still Life (Sanxia Haoren). They are adrift in search of someone or jobs, estranged from family; they remain outsiders wherever they sojourn; exploited by employers or deceived, they survive their ordeal with stoic resilience. Like the story of Han Sanming, a miner from Shanxi province returning to Fengjie, an upstream Yangtze town in search of his lost wife. Fengjie is set for demolition as it will be submerged due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The town is actually a dilapidated ruin. The people Han Sanming makes acquaintance with in Fengjie, like him, are drifters and itinerants in search of work or someone. Despite their different personal stories, they are all bound together by a common experience of estrangement, wandering, life in ruins, and stoic acceptance of life's destiny.

Rural–Urban Migration and the Long Shadow of Hukou

For the peasant migrants in China during the early decades of the reforms, leaving the rural areas and entering the cities was an enterprise fraught with difficulties, where they encountered the state-instituted barriers against territorial mobility. The main reason was that the rural-to-urban migration was regulated through a population administration system called the Household Registration Regulations, commonly known as the hukou system. Under this system, China's population was divided into two administrative segments: the agricultural

and the urban. People who are born in rural areas are registered as part of the agricultural household (nongye hukou), and those who are born in urban areas are registered as part of the non-agricultural household (feinongye hukou). In China, the Household Registration, or the hukou, is not simply a population census or a citizenship document. The administrative region of your birth can shape the life destinies of an individual, because a person with agricultural hukou is not allowed to migrate to the urban areas or cannot be employed in the urban industries without the state-regulated sanctions.

This system originated in the early 1950s when the new Communist state was trying to stabilise the sudden surge in population growth in the urban areas and also to maintain agricultural production after years of social turmoil. The influx of rural peasants into the urban areas in the early post-revolutionary years was a concern for the new government, as it affected social stability in the cities. So, in official parlance, these unregulated population flows were pejoratively referred to as "blind flows." In 1958, China's legislative body, the National People's Congress (NPC), adopted the People's Republic of China Hukou Registration Regulation, making internal migration subject to institutional controls. Luo Ruiqing, the then Minister of Public Security, stated that one of the important aims of this regulation was to prevent the "blind flow" of rural people to urban areas (Young 2023). Henceforth, rural-to-urban migration required the state sanction stipulated in the form of three permits: an 'employment permit' from the Labour Bureau, an 'enrolment permit' from a school, or a 'permit granting inward migration' from the Public Security Bureau. In the 1970s, to further reinforce migration control, many municipal authorities set up migrant shelters to temporarily detain migrants who had entered the cities without valid approvals. But as the economic reform years progressed, it became compellingly clear to the Chinese authorities that the urban industries required the rural migrants to sustain the labour-intensive manufacturing. Since the late 1990s, there has been considerable easing of the control regime of the hukou regulations. Municipalities such as Beijing and Chongqing, and Shenzhen with Special Economic Zones, initiated local-level hukou reforms to remove some of the stringent household registration requirements.

China's hukou system, perhaps, is a widely misunderstood institution outside. Partly because much of the Western accounts portray it as an instrument of state control designed to prevent rural-to-urban population mobility, and hence a discriminatory injunction that denies rural people their rights. It is therefore pertinent to note here that the hukou system has a wider purpose than migration control. As Chan and Zhang (199) have argued, "it was part of a larger economic and political system set up to serve multiple state interests." In the context of China's socialist redistributive goals, the hukou system functioned mainly as a welfare allocation system. For the rural residents, it provided land allocation and rice allowances, and for the urban residents, it provided employment in the urban work units (danwei), housing, access to medical care, and education. In the cities, the discrimination that the migrants faced was that they were excluded from the urban rationing regime, as Solinger (1999) calls it, which included jobs, transportation, electricity, water, and cheap food. This exclusion pushed the rural newcomers into the extreme fringes of urban society, where they were forced to live a life in exile. The Public Security Bureau officials who were responsible for implementing the hukou

regulations tended to regard the "blind streamers" from the countryside as a social source of disorder in the cities. So, the peasant migrants of the reform decades were often met with an unfavourable institutional attitude. Since rural residents were registered as members of an agricultural household (nongcun hukou), those who migrated to the cities for employment remained people without a fixed residence status, part of the "floating population" or transients without legal rights in the cities.

By the early 1990s, the gender composition of the rural-to-urban migration began to change significantly. Early migrants in the 1980s were mainly men between the ages of 20 to 40 who possessed certain fortitude to toil in extremely demanding labour in sectors such as construction, mining, brick kilns, warehouses, repair shops, etc. But with the advent of Western capitalism into the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in the eastern Chinese factory towns for export manufacturing of electronics, garments and apparel, and toys, the ranks of migrants were joined by an increasing number of young unmarried women referred to as dagongmei (working girls), whose labour struggles and tribulations are vividly documented by Pun Ngai (2005). The labour exploitation of the Chinese dagongmei, Pun Ngai argues, is structured along class and gender lines as they are subjected to triple oppression by global capitalism, state socialism, and family patriarchy.

Workers' Dormitories, Territorial Bounding, and Bare Lives

The metropolitan cities of Shanghai and Beijing, and the factory towns of Dongguan and Shenzhen, are promising lands of opportunity. For the migrant workers, these are aspirational cities where, if they can find employment, it is the beginning of a new journey in life. But when it comes to actually experiencing the city, it is a very different story. Because the promise of the cities has been confined to the spaces of work—a construction site, factory, warehouse, catering places, entertainment venues, etc. Once a migrant worker is hired, his or her lifeworld will be subject to what can be called a territorial bounding, where their mobility outside the worksite and the possibility of interacting with the local residents or generally experiencing the city will be restrained. The reason for this condition is the type of group residence provided by the companies to the migrants and their limited access to cash income. Since the late 1990s, a new type of residential infrastructure sprang up in most cities of China, where labour-intensive industries such as construction and manufacturing were growing faster, and also in the factory towns where Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) was inducing a new wave of export manufacturing.

The Chinese cities in the 1990s and 2000s had a melancholic grey appearance as they were going through significant physical transformations. Most of the cities became practically large construction sites over which hovered a grey haze of dust from the construction work. It was a common sight in those days, as this author recalls, to see a blue and white temporary lodging of typically three floors made of synthetic plank and steel bars next to the construction sites. It is in these 'workers' dormitories' that the migrant workers' lives were confined. The dormitories and construction sites formed some kind of enclosures where the migrants' working life and private home life were spatially integrated. In fact, this type of spatial arrangement helped the construction companies and the export manufacturers to ensure the regular rhythm of work, as the migrant workers would be routinely transiting between the worksite and residence. Chris Smith and Ngai Pun

have called this work-residence spatial integration a dormitory labour regime where internal migrants are accommodated and socially embedded. They characterise it as "a highly paternalistic, coercive, and intensive production system in which workers' lives are dominated by the employers."

Dormitory residence imposes two types of restrictions on the migrant workers. At one level, it functions as a physical enclosure that confines their mobility within. Be it the export manufacturers or construction companies, the employers will exercise control over the workers' time, where the idea of time divided between work, home, and leisure is no longer available to the migrants. The pressure of project schedules or export targets makes companies maintain a production level where overtime is the norm. So the labour becomes an extended activity that stretches across longer hours. The migrants are then only left with just enough time to rest and reproduce their labour power to be spent the next day. The extended work creates conditions of unfreedom even if the overtime work is voluntary.

Secondly, migrants usually have limited access to money income. In the construction sector, this situation arises because of the wage payment schedule, which is typically at the end of their one-year work. During the intervals, the workers are given a small amount to meet their necessities. The result is a prolonged existence of frugal life without money for non-essential expenses or leisure. In the dormitories that provide food, the workers are forced to be content with steamed buns, rice, and cabbage.

Thirdly, the factory management in the export sectors is a quasi-state that has established a disciplinary regime that closely regulates workers' lives. To take control over working time, the management has a strict schedule for workers' days in the factory as well as in the dormitory. The well-elaborated time rule, which details when to report, duration of lunch break, washroom breaks, and when to leave, is to be followed strictly and without relaxation. As in a territorial state, the management has elaborate instrumentalities and personnel to surveil and enforce the rules. The origins of time discipline regulating labour, elaborated in the context of the Industrial Revolution by E. P. Thompson, were perfected by Guangdong factory managers a century later.

A frugal existence largely tied down to the worksite–dormitory reduces migrants' social being to bare life.

Native-Place Identities: Longing for Belonging

Living in the unfamiliar cities far away from their native places, and separated from families, the migrants are deprived of social ties that offer them the consolations of personal affinities. They try to overcome this sense of brooding alienation by tapping into native-place affinities shared by migrants from the same provinces or regions such as Sichuan, Anhui, Hebei, etc. So, when the Sichuanren (the people from Sichuan) meet in Guangzhou factories, it instils and revives a sense of belonging they share as people from the same homeland. At a personal level, it also helps them to secure membership in a community of Sichuanese in the host cities. Native-place affinities are a deeply bonding reservoir of personal attachments. China's labour histories often record how migrants from the same province seek to create a community of their own in the host cities through personal networks, associations, self-help groups, etc. When migrants from the same province interact, they can converse in more culturally fulfilling regional dialects where the intended nuances of their speech or expressions are never lost. So is the case with culinary preference that can fulfil the urge for a well-acquainted palate. The story

of how Sichuan restaurants make such a noticeable presence in nearly all cities in China is because the migrants from Sichuan could not miss their strongly flavoured cuisine for too long a time. While living in Guangzhou, I had an occasion to be among an evening gathering of people from Hebei in a Hebei dining place, where I could see how the suppressed urge for native dialect and palate finds such a fulfilling expression when migrants from the same province meet.

Sweat, Hope, and Betrayal: Wage Arrears

Why were the rural migrants willing to take up work in faraway cities, knowing too well that work in construction sites, mines, or export industries would be gruelling, sometimes even hazardous? As described in the private letters of female migrant workers, the working conditions are oppressive even in the export industries in Shenzhen (Chan 2002). It is difficult to comprehend the personal urge that drove them into a life of toil, sweat, and sacrifice. Behind their audacious life decision lies an economic calculus focusing on money wages, which can be used for purposes beyond the simple reproduction of their labour power. In their collective consciousness and in personal motivations, monetary wages occupy a vitally important position. Supporting family, children's education, life improvements, or accumulating sufficient funds for a new home—the list of personal aspirations can be many. Therefore, even a slight unpredictability in wage payment by the employer can seriously upset their personal calculations, the foundational rationale for becoming migrant workers.

Despite this crucial calculus shaping labour migrations, many companies defaulted on wage payments to their workers. Throughout the reform decades, non-payment of wages and wage arrears were reported from many industrial sectors. Although there remain variations in terms of periods of arrears, amounts due, and the reasons for defaults, wage arrears became a serious problem affecting China's industrial peace in many cities. When the migrant workers are denied their due wages, it is not only the pain and misery they go through that deeply hurt them, but also the humiliation and sense of loss of personal value in the eyes of family members, as well as the community. In some of the industries, like in construction, workers are recruited through labour contractors (baogongtou) who have personal as well as native-place-based networks among the rural migrants. When the labour contractors default on their wages, the workers feel a deep sense of betrayal by someone in whom they had placed their personal trust. The interpersonal ties between the migrant workers and labour contractors are shaped by China's cultural milieu, where personal trust is a highly valued social bond. The violation of that social bond is a betrayal unforgivable in the eyes of the migrants. The labour contractors who have embezzled workers' wages or defaulted payment are called the "black-hearted" contractors, some of whom, like the one in Maoming in Guangdong, have been caught by the law and sentenced to a prison term (Xianning News Network, 2019).

Migrant workers resort to a variety of collective actions when their employer defaults on wage payment. In her accounts about workers' life in the factory towns in Guangdong, Hsiao-Hung Pai mentions an incident of an attempt at mass suicide by migrant workers. When a beer company defaulted on their wages, thirty migrant workers from Hunan province climbed up central Guangzhou's Haizhu Bridge in a desperate act of collective suicide by jumping off the bridge. Throughout the reform decades, non-payment of workers' wages

has been reported from many of China's industrial sectors. The most notorious case was the construction sector, where the peculiar payment schedule and the system of subcontracting periodically left migrant workers without their annual wage before the Spring Festival.

The portraits of migrant workers outlined above are testimonies of human endurance behind the story of China's miraculous economic growth. But in today's China, those moving testimonies are overwhelmed by enthralling fables of middle-class prosperity and modern urban life. For the Chinese city elites, the stoic image of Han Sanming from Still Life, as a representative metaphor of a labouring migrant, has faded away into a distant past in their otherwise delightful lifeworld. Similarly, the official rhetoric about economic development seldom alludes to the migrant workers as the builders of a prosperous China. Yet, China's social history of the reform era will attest to the resilience of the migrant workers, as the true makers of gleaming cities. ■


新華門
為人民服務

China's foreign policy rests on more than strategy and power. It is shaped by stories it tells about itself. These narratives blend history with ideology; civilisational pride, memories of subjugation, and doctrines of restraint or ambition. They explain Beijing's fixation on sovereignty, its comfort with hierarchy, and its push to refashion global rules. To understand China's rise is to see it not just as a geopolitical fact but as a civilisational revival.

- Decypher Team

Tianxia (Tianxia)

The worldview of "All Under Heaven" casts China as civilisation's natural centre. It informs hierarchical preferences in foreign affairs, with China at the core and others orbiting around it. Today it surfaces in calls for "Asian solutions to Asian problems" and visions of alternative governance. Xi Jinping's global rhetoric revives this ethos. It reinforces the belief that China's rise is a return to its rightful place rather than a new order.

Middle Kingdom (Zhongguo)

The "Middle Kingdom" frames China as the pivot between heaven and earth. It drives sensitivity to marginalisation and a demand for centrality in world politics. Diplomatically, it fuels resistance to encirclement and insistence on leadership in regional structures. The Communist Party wields it as a civilisational marker at home and abroad. It sustains the view that China's central role is historically natural and internationally justified.

Century of Humiliation

The memory of foreign domination from the Opium Wars (1839) to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 anchors China's nationalism. It hardens positions on sovereignty, non-interference, and rejection of Western intervention. The theme surfaces in territorial disputes and global institution battles. Xi Jinping links it directly to his promise of "national rejuvenation." It explains why Beijing interprets respect abroad as inseparable from legitimacy at home.

Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Heping Gongchu Wu Xiang Yuanze)

The memory of foreign domination from the Opium Wars (1839) to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 anchors China's nationalism. It hardens positions on sovereignty, non-interference, and rejection of Western intervention. The theme surfaces in territorial disputes and global institution battles. Xi Jinping links it directly to his promise of "national rejuvenation." It explains why Beijing interprets respect abroad as inseparable from legitimacy at home.

Keep a Low Profile (Taoguang Yanghui)

Deng Xiaoping urged China to hide its strength and focus on growth. The approach kept foreign policy restrained while China integrated into global markets. It reassured major powers during decades of economic ascent. Deng is remembered as the strategist of this caution. The idea shows how patience and pragmatism were once cornerstones of China's global posture.

Striving for Achievement (Fenfa Youwei)

Xi Jinping flipped Deng's caution into a call for proactive leadership. The phrase justifies China's push to shape international rules and institutions. It combines infrastructure projects, military upgrades, and ideological outreach. Xi himself embodies this assertive turn. It signals China's transition from quiet participant to active architect of world order.

Harmonious World (Hexie Shijie)

Hu Jintao advanced this idea of multipolar harmony rooted in Confucian thought. It promoted multilateralism, soft power, and cooperative global order. Though sidelined by Xi's initiatives, it framed China's UN diplomacy in the 2000s. Hu remains its central voice. It marked an early step in framing China's rise as peaceful and system-friendly.

Mandate of Heaven (Tianming)

Once a domestic doctrine of legitimacy, it implied rulers governed with divine sanction. In foreign affairs, it supports China's self-image as a responsible stabiliser. The idea colours narratives of a "peaceful rise" and moral global leadership. Xi invokes its spirit in his moral framing of China's role. It suggests China's leadership is not only strategic but also morally ordained.

Dual Circulation Strategy (Shuang Xunhuan)

The strategy seeks balance between domestic resilience and global engagement. It reflects fears of overdependence on foreign demand and external shocks. In practice, it guides selective openness tied to security concerns. Xi rolled it out after 2020 as a hedge against global turbulence. It demonstrates China's effort to insulate its rise from vulnerability to Western pressure.

Tributary Logic in Modern Form (Chaogong Tixi)

Imperial China managed foreign relations through a tributary hierarchy. Modern echoes appear in the Belt and Road, with asymmetric deals projecting influence. The pattern favours bilateralism and tailored partnerships. It ties today's rise to China's imperial past. It frames global influence as an extension of historical legitimacy rather than expansionism.

Community of Shared Future for Mankind (Renlei Mingyun Gongtongti)

Xi's signature idea calls for a new global order rooted in interdependence. It frames China as a benevolent leader offering alternatives to Western dominance. The vision drives BRI narratives, UN diplomacy, and governance debates. Xi is its chief author and advocate. It underlines China's ambition to transform globalisation under its own ideological imprint.

Chinese Conception of Justice

Justice in the Chinese tradition is less about individual rights than about harmony, fairness, and moral duty. Shaped by Confucian ideals, it treats law as a tool to secure order and collective good rather than a shield for the individual. In foreign policy, this appears in Beijing's emphasis on equality among states, rejection of double standards, and calls for "fairness" in global governance. Leaders frame justice as moral balance; rooted in righteousness (yi) and benevolence (ren) to present China as a civilisational power with its own ethical compass. It helps explain why China casts itself not just as a competitor, but as a guardian of global fairness on its own terms.

Periphery First (Zhoubian Waijiao)

China treats its neighbourhood as the bedrock of wider ambitions. This shapes Belt and Road projects, regional summits, and territorial assertiveness. It reflects a belief that regional dominance precedes global power. Xi has elevated this policy through deals and diplomacy. It shows how China sees control of its periphery as essential to global legitimacy.

Iron Rice Bowl

The iron rice bowl refers to guaranteed lifetime employment and welfare under state socialism, covering civil servants, soldiers, and workers in state-owned enterprises. It embodied the Communist Party's promise of stability after 1949, ensuring income, housing, and benefits regardless of productivity. Though Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s sought to break it, the idea persists as a symbol of state responsibility. In foreign policy, it reinforces the view that domestic security and social guarantees are prerequisites for external strength. It highlights how China's leaders tie legitimacy abroad to stability and welfare at home.

Civilisational State (Wenming Guojia)

This frame casts China as a civilisation with continuity, not a modern nation-state. It supports claims of uniqueness and rejection of Western universalism. In diplomacy, it justifies "Chinese solutions" and alternative governance models. Thinkers like Zhang Weiwei amplify this narrative. It provides Beijing with a language of exceptionalism to resist external critique.

These ideas provide the backdrop to China's diplomacy, but they are not rigid rules. Beijing often bends or even abandons them when interests demand, and realpolitik, economics, and security pressures shape outcomes just as much. Still, they offer a valuable lens: a set of stories and doctrines that explain how China frames its choices, even if those choices are ultimately driven by pragmatism and circumstance.

Kidnapped at Six, Silenced for Decades: China's Grip on Tibet's Panchen Lama

MANASHJYOTI KARJEE

A Child Removed, A Leader Silenced

In mid-May 1995, a six-year-old boy from Lhari in central Tibet was appointed to one of Buddhism's most delicate thrones. Three days later, he was abducted by Chinese officials. For three decades, the Chinese authorities have offered assurances that convince few. Although Beijing occasionally claims that he lives an ordinary life, UN specialists and diplomats have repeatedly requested independent access, but none has been granted so far. The boy in question was Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, whom the 14th Dalai Lama recognised as the 11th Panchen Lama. That recognition triggered a contest over religious power that remains unresolved to this day.

Today, the boy would be 36 years old; an age at which previous Panchen Lamas began to assume active religious and political responsibilities. Historically, these figures mentored young Dalai Lamas and acted as intermediaries between monastic authorities and external powers.

The Panchen Lineage and Its Vulnerability to Power

To understand the persistence of this issue, one must consider the institution itself. The Panchen Lama lineage is historically associated with Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse, which was founded in 1447. For centuries, the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama have served as parallel poles of Geluk authority, each contributing to the recognition of the other's reincarnation. The position is a doctrinal mechanism of succession that shapes continuity and legitimacy. Within the Tibetan tradition, it relies on identification by religious authorities rather than administrative imposition.

The political incentive to shape this process has appeared repeatedly throughout history. In the 1790s, the Qing court introduced the Golden Urn, a ritual lottery intended to regulate the selection of high-ranking tulkus. Beijing now invokes this exact precedent to justify a controlling role in religious succession.

But historians note that the Golden Urn was used unevenly and often to serve imperial statecraft rather than spiritual order, suggesting that the current reliance

on it reflects jurisdictional ambition more than tradition. Although practice varied, the political advantage of influence over reincarnation was difficult to ignore. Control over the Panchen succession has long offered strategic value. Without authority over the Panchen Lama, Beijing risks losing the future succession battle over the next Dalai Lama, a development that would influence Tibetan loyalty and spiritual legitimacy for decades.

Manufactured Legitimacy and Tibetan Defiance

The tenth Panchen Lama, Choekyi Gyaltsen, recognised the danger of such management. In 1962, he submitted a 70,000-character petition to Chinese authorities, documenting abuses in Tibet. The petition resulted in punishment and long periods of political restriction before his partial rehabilitation. He died in 1989, leaving a vacancy marked by historical significance and unresolved tensions regarding the boundary between state and religious authority.

The vacancy left by Gedhun Choekyi Nyima did not remain unfilled. In November and December 1995, the authorities installed another child, Gyaincain Norbu, the son of Communist Party members, as the state-recognised Panchen Lama through a Golden Urn ceremony. Monks who conducted the traditional search were punished, and Chadrel Rinpoche, the head of the search commission, received a six-year sentence. Beijing then consolidated its authority through legal mechanisms. In 2007, the State Administration for Religious Affairs issued Order No. 5, requiring government approval for all high-level reincarnations and effectively granting a veto over succession. The intention was clear, but securing acceptance among Tibetans has proved more difficult.

This case is situated within a broader historical and political context, in the shadow of the Red Dragon. Tibet's forced incorporation into the People's Republic of China, followed by decades of securitisation, has involved politically motivated prosecutions, constraints on language and spiritual life, and systematic regulation of monasteries. The Panchen succession is one of the clearest examples of state intervention in a community's right to choose its religious leaders and of how many Tibetans perceive these rules as prioritising political control over spiritual autonomy.

The Coming Battle Over the Dalai Lama's Future

The implications extend well beyond a single position. Because the Panchen Lama has traditionally been involved in recognising future Dalai Lamas, the 1995 abduction foreshadowed a larger confrontation over Tibet's most significant religious office. Beijing asserts that it will select the next Dalai Lama, citing history and current legislation. The present Dalai Lama has stated that only recognition by legitimate Tibetan religious authorities, potentially outside China, would be valid and that a state-appointed successor should be refused. These opposing claims are on a collision course, and the 1995 abduction has become the precedent by which both sides interpret the future.

International attention has fluctuated over time, but the thirtieth anniversary revived public scrutiny. Human rights organisations again referred to the case as an enforced disappearance and renewed calls for independent access. UN experts raised concerns about state interference in reincarnation processes and reminded Beijing that enforced disappearance contravenes international obligations. Several governments requested evidence

of the Panchen Lama's whereabouts and well-being. Beijing responded with familiar rhetoric about legality, national harmony and religious practice under Chinese law, without addressing the central question of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima's condition or location.

Inside Tibet, the issue forms part of a broader system of governance. Images of the Dalai Lama are prohibited in many areas. Monasteries face heightened control, and patriotic education programmes have expanded. The state-recognised Panchen Lama appears at official functions, meets selected delegations and publicly supports senior Chinese leaders. Many Tibetans recognise the state's focus on stability while still regarding such appearances as performative rather than spiritually authoritative.

China's approach to the Panchen Lama is consistent with a wider pattern. In regions such as Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, the government has imposed strict controls on language, religion and cultural expression where these are perceived as potential challenges to national unity. The disappearance of Nyima mirrors, in religious form, the broader practices of detention, re-education and linguistic regulation seen elsewhere. Since the Maoist era, the Communist Party has treated religion as opium for the Chinese masses, a rival locus of loyalty and a threat to political supremacy. Monasteries, mosques and churches have all experienced closures, ideological conditioning and surveillance. The Tibetan case is particularly stark because it involves not only religious practice but direct state control over religious leadership.

The story repeatedly returns to the missing boy because he represents a link between the past and the future. For exiled Tibetans, his disappearance symbolises the denial of their community's right to determine its own spiritual leadership. For Tibetans inside China, the subject remains off-limits mainly in public discourse. Tibetan Buddhism is diverse and internally complex, and humility is necessary when speaking of its traditions. Even so, the essential facts are not in dispute. The stakes increase as time passes.

The Dalai Lama is now 89, and Beijing intends to use its state-appointed Panchen Lama to confirm his successor. Tibetan leaders in exile have warned that any candidate selected under state direction will be rejected. The world may soon witness a dual succession, with one Dalai Lama recognised by Dharamsala and another by Beijing. The historical parallel to competing popes in medieval Europe is not exact, yet the implications for Asia's political and religious landscape are profound. A recognised child vanished. A surrogate was installed. New regulations consolidated state control. Until independent access verifies the identity and condition of the Panchen Lama named in 1995, the central unanswered question will continue to carry political weight far beyond the boundaries of Tashilhunpo. ■


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Beyond the Great Firewall: China's Role in Global Governance of Technology

GERMÁN PATIÑO OROZCO

Introduction

At the end of July 2025, Shanghai hosted the World Artificial Intelligence Conference, an event described by the Singapore-based think tank, Artificial Intelligence International Institute, as "one of the most influential gatherings within the global tech, science, and industry ecosystem". On the first day of the conference, the Chinese government released the Action Plan for the Global Artificial Intelligence Governance, signalling a concerted effort to shape the international regulation on Artificial Intelligence. The plan envisions a coalition led by China, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the European Union to establish shared norms and regulatory frameworks, whereas the Unites States has pursued a more isolationist and lightly regulated approach, privileging national competitiveness over global coordination.

This initiative is significant because it reflects China's ambition to assume a central role in establishing norms, standards, and ethical frameworks for AI. At the same time, raises critical questions regarding China's objectives, what is the main how will it balance domestic priorities with international collaboration? What objectives does China seek to achieve in the domain of artificial intelligence? What is its technological approach?

The emerging technologies have become a fundamental feature of the contemporary international relations because of its ubiquity in the human activities. The profound effect have permeated in many fields and disciplines in vast scale and deep scope. For that reason, technology has become a global phenomenon. Until recently, technology has not been studied systematically in international relations or outside of the technical considerations. Nevertheless, in recent years, technology topics are beginning to have great value for international politics.

Primarily, the technologies that promote interconnectivity are prominent among the state concerns and the deployment of strategies to control, regulate and influence them. Many governments

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have put high-technology as a priority for their development, trying to ensure and safeguarding the integrity of these infrastructures as their main approach to the digital realm. Essentially in the case of Chinese government, these tasks are carried out through the mobilization of considerable amount of material and immaterial resources. The People's Republic of China have underpinned areas like cybersecurity, autonomous technology development and the establishment of technological standards as a strategic priorities.

The cyber domain has become a zone of geopolitical competition of states. Given their importance for politics, international security, and economic growth, the digital technologies and critical infrastructures have become key factors in the relationship between powers. Specifically, this translates into agendas, ideologies, capabilities development that take place in this new geopolitical space. In the case of China, this has become evident with an active role in global technology governance. The Chinese government considers that some aspects of the regulation technology are fundamental both domestic and external strategic aspiration

The Chinese government has decided to fully engage with recent technological transformations to accelerate its development through a series of increasingly coherent and comprehensive initiatives. This has led the government of the People's Republic of China to seek to create the conditions for technology governance, primarily through data processing centres, the deployment of fibber optic cables, the building of AI models, and the research in quantum computing. The main objective is to drive technological innovation as a priority for China's domestic and external development. I highlight that, first, China's technological development primarily responds the need to bolster domestic development and, consequently, also serves as an instrument for international positioning and influence. However, what are the main characteristics of Chinese technological approach? In what form is related with an evolution in its foreign policy?

Without intending to offer an exhaustive analysis, this text aims to establish certain theoretical and methodological foundations for the study of a complex phenomenon in international relations, one that is expected to persist and emerge as a central issue in the new world order: namely the pervasive role of technology across virtually all domains of human activity and the ways in which social actors respond to the opportunities and challenges it engenders.

The China's Approach to Technology Governance

Several of the current technologies are part and product of the globalisation processes, and therefore represent a crossroads in global governance frameworks. Since Deng Xiaoping reforms, China has taken advantage of the global market to develop its economic leverage and its international projection. In this way, China have sought to play a fundamental role in shaping, building, and consolidating technological governance processes. Moreover, this represents an expression of the evolution of its foreign policy approach. We can say that the Chinese foreign approach transitioned from an alignment to the socialist bloc, to isolation to compenetrating to the global structures. In this tenor, China have developed external policies that seek to be more cooperative and accommodate to the global order.

There is an intense and ongoing debate regarding China's role in shaping global governance, particularly in the realms of trade, international standards, and technology. Scholars and policymakers

question the extent to which China seeks to influence existing international institutions versus creating parallel frameworks that reflect its strategic interests and development model. Some scholars argue that the domestic challenges could be a load to the aspirations of Chinese government to become a global player. This position highlights that China must focus on avoid a major confrontation with other powers and concentrate on its domestic development. Some agree that China should take a more responsible role to the global issues. In this side, the argument indicates that the position and interest of China in any issue can be ignored. This debate is driven by the country's growing economic, geopolitical, and technological power, which allows it to assert significant influence in multilateral forums, set regulatory norms, and promote initiatives -such as those related to digital governance and artificial intelligence governance- that may diverge from the other technological powers. Consequently, discussions about China's participation in global governance raise critical questions about balance between cooperation and competition among major powers, the legitimacy of new rules, and the potential reshaping of the global order.

For that reason, the Chinese authorities have argued how China should increase its participation in the global governance but at the same time trying not to create antagonistic positions. China has adopted a comprehensive approach to technology governance. It is important to note that China's advancement in high-technology has been shaped through a gradual and organic process, reflecting a strategy that balances state-led planning, innovation, and the building of technological ecosystems.

For the Chinese government, some technologies stand out for their potential and capacity to support different areas of human development such as artificial intelligence, robotics, 5G, telecommunications, aeronautical and aerospace technology and biotechnology. In this context, China's commitment to technology has been operationalized through a range of strategic programs and initiatives aimed to foster technological innovation, achieving strategic autonomy in science and technology, and enhancing the capabilities of both public and private actors within technological ecosystems. In this regard, some initiatives have been released, including but not limited to the following: Made in China 2025, the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan, the Cybersecurity Law, the Data Security Law, the Personal Information Protection Law and the Code of Ethics for New Generation AI.

On one hand, the Made in China 2025 was an initiative to integrate intelligent processes into various manufacturing sectors. The project aimed to position China as a leading power in ten strategic sectors of advanced technology. For its part, the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan, have conducted a coordinated framework to address some of the challenges related with the emerging technologies. According to the Chinese authorities, the main goal is to establish China as the leader of Artificial Intelligence applications by 2030. On the other hand, the Data Security Law and, the Personal Information Protection Law were issued to enhance data security and to set strict rules over personal information. collection and use. Finally, the Code of Ethics for New Generation AI pretends to function as an ethical guide in the development of AI.

The primary objective of these legislative measures is to position China as a leading driver of technological innovation on the global stage. On one hand, certain regulations emphasize the necessity of deepening domestic reforms, enhancing the internal economic environment, and fostering conditions to industrial improvement. By strengthening domestic capacities, the Chinese government aims

to build a robust economic position that can sustain the regime legitimacy. On the other hand, these policies serve as a strategic roadmap for China's transformation into an important player within the global technology governance. Through coordinated policies, China seeks to shape international standards, norms, and governance mechanism in emerging technological fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and quantum computing.

However, there is disagreement for the core governance of some high-technologies. Disputes over digital governance increasingly represent one of the primary arenas of global competition the new spaces of competition in the twenty-first century. As technology becomes ever more central to economic, political, and military power, control over the rules, norms and regulatory frameworks has emerged as a strategic priority for major states. Currently, the state of global digital governance is fragmented and lacks coordination. Three main perspectives stand out for attempting to articulate and organize the global technological landscape.

First, the United States has historically adopted a multi-stakeholder approach to digital governance, emphasizing the involvement of a diverse array of actors, including government agencies, private companies, civil society organizations, and technical communities. This approach reflects a relatively flexible regulatory perspective. meanwhile, the approach of the European Union prioritize the protection of individual over the state interests. The main purpose of EU is to offer personal data protection above the interest of the state. Finally, China's approach is largely state-centric, with digital governance policies designed to align data management with national strategic priorities. These differences illustrate the extent to which political and legal principles inform and shape models of digital governance, while simultaneously highlighting the inherent challenges and frictions encountered in efforts to formulate integral standards for data protection.

To the authorities in China it is essential to have an active participation in the global regulatory frameworks, to generate an strengthened articulation of the technological sector with national security, to contribute to the reduction of risks vectors for the damage of information, and to promote the concept of cyber-sovereignty as an organising principle of cyberspace. For the Chinese government, the issue of cybersecurity is closely tied to its governing practice. In other words, beyond the technical aspects of information protection, cybersecurity also plays a fundamental role in reducing points of vulnerability that may undermine social order and the legitimacy of the central government. On one hand, the Chinese government is promoting the free flow of data related to digital commerce, while, on the other hand, other types of digital information are demanding stricter data control. This clearly reflects the form of China's proposed digital architecture, which aligns the Chinese government domestic and foreign strategic priorities.

With this in mind, the Chinese government asserts that cyberspace should not be an unregulated or anarchic environment. This stance has gradually led to an increase in the productions of norms to govern the cyber domain, resulting in an increasingly complex and intricate regulatory framework. As several scholars have observed, Chinese authorities have sought to play a more prominent role in several institutions responsible for the governance of global standards. This reflects a broader strategic intent to influence the normative architecture of cyberspace to align the global governance with national interests.

In this effort, technical standardisation has been a crucial component of global data governance. On this effort, the Chinese authorities have increase their engagement

with different international organization, particularly with the International Organization for Standardisation. The People's Republic of China has expressed its interest in being a central actor in shaping the norms, standards, and values of digital governance. On this basis, the China's digital governance approach integrates elements of sovereignty, national security, development and privacy. To this end, the Chinese government has sought to outlines a framework of digital governance that addresses both domestic and external strategic considerations.

Likewise, the Chinese government has advanced initiatives such as the Global Data Security Initiative, which underscores the importance of safeguarding national sovereignty, data governance rights, and norms to rule the cyberspace. While, I do not deny the existence of strategic competition with other powers -particularly the US- in the technological sphere, I try to move beyond the Manichean narratives that portray a single side view of China's technological strategies. Although the Chinese authorities consistently emphasize the pursuit of joint global solutions to the challenges affecting the digital sphere, regularly, their positions do not fully align with the perspectives of other powers, thereby giving rise to situations of competition and even conflict.

Final Remarks

It is worth to mention that a systemic level a complex and unprecedented dynamic has begun to emerge. In the global geostructure, the world is undergoing a hegemonic shift framed within an intense dynamics of strategic competition, in which the technological factors appears to be crucial and indispensable. While the United States has prioritized technological primacy, China has placed significant emphasis on coordinated global governance of technology. The Chinese government has tried to engage in technical discussion on AI security, the necessity for regulation on technology and oversight to mitigate risks information. This approach has combined national interests with collaborative efforts with other powers.

In that tenor, technological competition between China and the United States has emerged as one of the defining features of contemporary international relations, shaping both economic and geopolitical dynamics in the twenty-first century. At the same time, China-US technological competition is not confined only to the technological sphere, but represents a broader contest over the definition of values, normative principles, and institutional architecture of the emerging global order. However, without denying the reality, my argument is that such a perspective could obstruct the possibility and spaces of confluence and cooperation between China and the United States.

This implies that global technological cooperation yields significant benefits. collaborative initiatives enable the pooling of resources, expertise and knowledge thereby accelerating scientific and technological progress. It is also important to emphasize that most states around the world face comparable challenges in the digital sphere. Confronting shared issues such as cybersecurity threats, weaponization of artificial intelligence, data governance, and the ethical application of emerging technologies requires sustained cooperation, the formulation of common standards and the promotion of interoperability.

Several scholars have underscored the considerable influence that technological corporate actors exert over the regulatory frameworks shaping the digital sphere. Some scholar has even pointed out that their influence is so profound that it marks a "technopolar" moment in international

relations, fundamentally altering the authority of the state. This dynamic raises critical questions about the accountability of such actors, the balance of power between states and private corporations, and the potential risks to both national sovereignty and global digital governance.

To this end, China's intent to reshape the contours of global technological governance reflects a comprehensive approach that integrates political, economic, social and technical dimensions. This digital approach seeks to regulate both domestic and international digital governance, making the enhancement of technological capabilities a fundamental pillar of China's governance strategy. In this sense, the technological domain is not only instrumental for strengthening global governance capacities but also for advancing national development and promoting the overall welfare of society.

Similarly, I have argued that technical and scientific advancement constitutes a crucial element in the construction of a new global order for the Chinese government. The People's Republic of China deliberately seeks to endow the digital environment with new characteristics and capacities, articulated through a range of far-reaching initiatives. The interplay between domestic and global imperatives reflects a deliberative approach in which technological development functions simultaneously as a tool for domestic reforms and as a an instrument of global positioning. ■


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Tu Youyou: An Innovator of Chinese Traditional Medicine

PRIYANKA GARODIA

In the world of scientific innovation, some stories unravel in the fluorescent light of laboratories with sanctions and approvals and others unfold with determination, resilience and alternate medicinal knowledge. The story of Tu Youyou is nothing short of remarkable - a pharmaceutical chemist who was relatively known till she was 80, her journey is one of resilience, grit and a single-minded determination to reconcile modern science with traditional wisdom.

Born in China in the 1930s, Yu Youyou's career was caught up in the socio-political conditions of her country. Educated in Peking University, she studied pharmacology that allowed her to marry western chemical science with China's rich history of herbs. It is with this knowledge that she was able to solve one of the deadliest crises of the times - Malaria. During the 1960s, when the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, she was handpicked to work on a special military assignment called Project 523. The mission was to cure malaria which was wreaking havoc in China and among the soldiers fighting the Vietnam War. Existing medicines were not sufficient and over 2,40,000 chemicals not yielding any results, the entire scientific community was lost on how to proceed.

Tu Youyou was unconventional in her approach. While scientists across the globe were pouring over research and conducting experiments with synthetic chemical compounds - she began a meticulous study of ancient Chinese medicine. Her team reviewed over 2000 traditional recipes and herbs that could help in the mission and ultimately narrowed down their study to 640 specimens. She was successful in identifying a particular plant that helped ease intermittent fevers, a key symptom of malaria. She was able to do so by studying an ancient book from the early 1600s titled "A Handbook of Prescriptions for Emergencies" that detailed the use of qinghao or sweet wormwood to elevate symptoms. However, success was not that easy to come by.

The herb was destroyed easily on exposure to heat and boiling. It was ineffective and lost all its therapeutic properties. Tu Youyou did not give up; she went back to the texts that she had dedicated her entire life studying and discovered a crucial detail - the herb was to be steeped in cold water and not hot. This tiny detail revolutionised the treatment of malaria. The simple change in extraction process when tested on mice and monkeys, yielded remarkable results. It was 100% effective in curing malaria. Given the urgency of the situation and the immediate need to go to human trials, Tu

Youyou volunteered to inject herself first with the compound extracted from qinghao - she called it artemisinin. Her trials had been successful, and the drug yielded steady results. It was disseminated widely in the Hainan province that saw a high prevalence of malaria.

However, China was a closed and secret country and Project 523 was, in fact, a secret. The results of the trials were published without recognising the role Tu Youyou played in this revolution of medicine. She remained uncredited for decades and it was only in the early 2000s upon the declassification of the project that the international community knew who she was. Her story reflects the systemic biases and often open discrimination that women have faced in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology nearly 40 years after she discovered artemisinin in 2015.

Tu Youyou's work saved countless lives across the globe and was made the first line of defence against malaria by the World Health Organisation (WHO). She gained the nickname "the three without" as she did not have a doctorate, a medical degree nor research training abroad. Her bold departure from the predisposed path of scientific greatness that tread only on academic credentials and international experience provides us with examples on how greatness can be achieved with unconventional paths. This becomes highly relevant for women and other minorities in the field who have systematically faced higher barriers to access formal, academic opportunities and training.

Tu Youyou's work underscores the value of plurality in the field of science. When Western medicine was failing to provide a viable solution to serious illnesses like malaria, it was the traditional practices of herbology in Ancient China that yielded results. This proved that creative diversity, engagement with multiple knowledge forms and other indigenous methods that are often overlooked in mainstream science could hold answers to the problems at hand. Tu Youyou's life and work that she dedicated to tying modern medicine and ancient wisdom together came from her unique standpoint as a woman of colour in a specific socio-cultural position. Ultimately, she has become a global role model for young people to emulate in the world where one's difference from the mainstream and steady determination can help overcome systemic obstacles. Her legacy continues to echo in the annals of history. ■

Women Hold Up Half the Sky but Not in the Party

PRIYANKA GARODIA

Introduction

China poses a striking paradox when it comes to gender politics. While women make up 48–49% of the population, their presence in political leadership remains relatively low in comparison. Despite touting lines of promoting gender equality, having mandated quotas, and rising education levels among women, political representation of Chinese women is remarkably low and often symbolic.

This discrepancy highlights an important question to explore:

> *Why have women eluded political representation despite the structural and social progress made by China that in any situation would support parity?*

Rather than being a linear march through history, the narrative of women in Chinese politics is one of selective instrumentalisation and institutional exclusion, which has brought to light the internal contradictions of China.

The essay is a reflection on the persistent under-representation of women in Chinese politics and is based on the combined effects of state feminism and institutional exclusion. The logic of state feminism encodes the instrumentalisation of women to meet developmental and strategic goals rather than actual political participation. Institutionally, women have been excluded from career pathways, quota limitations, and company norms that reinforce a glass ceiling. These male-dominated pathways, coupled with the logic of the state, are why, despite formal inclusion, women have remained marginal in politics.

Women's Representation Through Numbers

If we were to glance at the quantitative evidence of women's inclusion in Chinese politics, it paints an abysmal picture. At the legislative level, women occupy around 26–27% of seats in the National People's Congress (NPC) and 22% in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

In 2022, in the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), only 11 of the 205 members were women. That is merely 5.4% representation. Adding to this is the fact that the Politburo and Standing

Committee currently do not have any female members. Historically speaking, the Politburo has included women, but the same cannot be said for the Standing Committee.

At the provincial level, matters remain the same – party secretaries and governors are overwhelmingly male, with a few token representations of women. Despite having a long history of gender quotas from as early as the 1930s to Maoist reforms and the Cultural Revolution, quotas have been used simply as a tool of political mobilisation and not genuine empowerment. Informal norms and party priorities have constantly undermined the inclusion of women in any meaningful manner in the political process. This proves that the entire "add-gender-and-stir" method rarely creates substantive changes for gender equality.

Thus, despite making up half the population of the country, women are consistently under-represented at decision-making levels, especially at the apex of power.

State Feminism and Women as a Political Tool

There can be no denying that Chinese politics reflects the deliberate efforts of the state to instrumentalise women's political participation rather than promote genuine empowerment. Women's status during the Mao era was defined by the term "Iron Women." They were called to mobilise as workers, soldiers, and revolutionaries. While the framing of women's contributions, predominantly coined in the idiom of gender equality and sexual liberation, often created an additional layer of oppression – a "double burden." Women were expected to participate in paid work while continuing to perform unpaid domestic labour as wives and mothers, which merged their newer responsibilities with traditional gendered expectations. Equality here was constructed as functional and collective, serving the state's ideological and productive ends rather than women's individual and autonomous social position.

In the post-Mao era, particularly with the rise of Deng Xiaoping, there was a discursive shift towards an essentialist understanding of gender roles for women. They were not just called to represent women in terms of motherhood, family, and moral virtue, but were encouraged to enact Confucian ideals of yin–yang harmony. State-sponsored economic modernisation was compatible with these traditional ideas of femininity. The narratives held strong for both men and women.

With Xi Jinping, traditional womanhood has been revived, all in the name of being both pro-natalist and nationalist. Birth policies that encourage women to give birth, maintain family structure and values, and embody moral virtue are tied to state narratives of women as custodians of social and cultural maintenance. In this trajectory of social development, the very notion of woman is instrumentalised for the ends of the state rather than as an autonomous political subject worthy of decision-making.

Women's visibility is symbolic and conditional at best, dependent on acting in national collective ways that do not redirect substantive political power away from the status quo.

Institutional Exclusion and the Glass Ceiling

Colluding with this logic of the state is the role that institutions play in keeping women from political power. The CCP's system of promotions favours male-dominated networks and career paths. Guanxi networks and early entry into the party system remain elusive to women. Even the norms of retirement – where women retire earlier than men – circumvent their ability to hold top-tier positions in the party. This ultimately curtails long-term career trajectories.

As mentioned earlier, the quota system is highly tokenistic and applied weakly. While there is guaranteed numerical representation at the lower levels, no substantive authority or influence is wielded by these women. Even the portfolios of policymaking inhabit a gendered logic – "soft" portfolios are given to women, including profiles like education, health, or social welfare, whereas men remain in control of "hard" portfolios like national security, finance, or foreign policy. Informal networks, mentorship, and senior-level guanxi reinforce male solidarity, establishing a self-reproducing hierarchy of leadership. Women encounter structural barriers not merely in being promoted but in achieving legitimacy within these elite networks.

The combined impact of these formal and informal barriers creates a glass ceiling that women constantly run into. Women are seen in lower ranks and lesser portfolios but do not frame policies or set national agendas.

Why Does This Matter?

With its projection of itself as a modern, progressive global actor, China's all-male leadership undermines its soft power projections globally. Gendered imbalances in politics often create a symbolic perception of power rather than a substantive and inclusive reality. This weakens international credibility, leading to poor perception.

Domestically, the exclusion of women diminishes the diversity of ideas in policymaking, especially in demographic, health, and social policy areas. Women's under-representation in leadership positions compromises the ability to effectively address issues like ageing populations, reproductive health, and social welfare, because these issues are treated as secondary within masculine leadership circles.

China illustrates a style of symbolic inclusion characteristic of authoritarian regimes – women are seen in rhetoric and quotas but not substantive power. This institutional exclusion supports structural areas of blindness in governance and policy construction, which over time can weaken long-term institutional effectiveness. This is reflective of a male-dominated culture that often views women as instrumental rather than autonomous.

Conclusion

The paradox of Chinese women's political representation remains evident: on the one hand, they are hyper-visible in official discourse and state rhetoric, but remain unseen in positions of authority. While this essay provides a cursory understanding of this situation, further research is required to better understand how the Chinese quota system works and the gendered nature of how power is conceived in society.

The two mechanisms addressed here – state feminism that instrumentalises women and enforced exclusion through institutional channels, networks of guanxi connections, and tokenistic quotas – work in tandem to reproduce male-dominated leadership and maintain hierarchical power structures, granting women visibility but little actual influence.

The question persists whether women will be able to achieve genuine political power without radical structural or cultural changes.

> *If the past is any indication, unless substantive changes are made in quota implementation, portfolio allocation, and the way networking works in the CCP, women will remain symbolic in China.* ■


中国人民解放
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Powering the Chinese Navy with Hybrid Naval Vessels

ASHISH DANGWAL

The deep integration of dual-use technology in China's military modernisation has become a major source of concern for Western security circles. From space exploration and chip manufacturing to shipbuilding and missile production, Beijing in recent years has merged civilian and military technologies across sectors.

The strategy, openly detailed and widely recognised as Military-Civil Fusion (MCF), is designed to advance dual-use innovations that simultaneously strengthen defence capabilities and fuel economic growth.

China is neither the first nor the only nation to pursue such a strategy. Similar approaches have long been used by Western powers, including the US, UK, and France. What distinguishes Beijing, however, is the scale of its programmes and the advanced technologies that have pushed it to the forefront of global defence modernisation.

Importantly, the MCF programme in China is no clandestine endeavour. It is a publicly stated national policy supported by the highest authorities. Its central idea is to organise civilian infrastructure, businesses, and technological advancements so that they can be diverted to military applications during emergencies.

In practice, this blurs the once-clear lines between commerce and defence. A shipyard that builds merchant ships may also construct warships to military standards. An AI lab may just as easily translate its inventions into targeting technologies as into vision systems for commercial use. A semiconductor foundry producing chips for smartphones may also supply the microelectronics used in missiles and radar systems.

Nowhere is this dual-use logic more evident than in the maritime industry. China's growing naval power and commercial ambitions make it strategically imperative to project and sustain military force across oceans. While new aircraft carriers and destroyers often dominate headlines, the quieter buildup of logistics and transport capacity—frequently overlooked because it lacks the glamour of warships—may ultimately prove decisive.

These vessels may not sound especially high-

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tech, but China's integration of civilian ships into military operations represents a distinct form of innovation. Not all dual-use advances depend on cutting-edge technology. The case of China's roll-on/roll-off (Ro-Ro) ships illustrates how ordinary merchant vessels can be transformed into powerful military force multipliers in preparation for future wars.

Roll-On, Roll-Off: China's Floating Force Multiplier

China's military has been rapidly modernising, with its main goal being reunification with Taiwan. This has led to an upsurge in military exercises and live-fire drills across the Strait, particularly after former US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit in August 2022.

In China's war-preparation planning, Ro-Ro ships serve as a clear example of dual-use innovation, enabling commercial fleets to double as strategic military assets. These ships are primarily built for civilian purposes, transporting heavy equipment, vehicles, and trucks across seas for domestic and international trade.

However, within the MCF framework, they can also serve as latent military assets. In times of crisis, a ship that once transported cars to overseas markets could be diverted to move military equipment through disputed waters.

The employment of such vessels would pose little administrative challenge for Beijing. In 2016, the Chinese government passed legislation obligating domestic shipping companies to provide support to the armed forces whenever national interests are deemed at risk. This legal framework effectively erases the distinction between commercial and military fleets, ensuring that Ro-Ro ships—even while engaged in international trade—can be requisitioned without hesitation for defence purposes.

Moreover, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been modifying these commercial Ro-Ro ferries to military standards, already equipping them with stern ramps designed to handle amphibious combat vehicles. Such upgrades transform ostensibly commercial vessels into platforms capable of supporting amphibious landings—a capability regarded as strategically essential in any Taiwan Strait contingency.

China has also been quietly stepping up production of Ro-Ro ferries. A study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) China Power Project suggests that this expanding output reflects a dual-purpose strategy, with the vessels potentially deployed in a Taiwan conflict.

"While ro-ros are generally innocuous, Chinese military planners have taken note of their dual-use capabilities and are making use of the ships to enhance the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)," the CSIS report noted.

Globally, there are more than 700 Ro-Ro ships in operation, yet China controls fewer than 100. Even so, CSIS analysts highlight a sharp increase ahead. Chinese shipyards are expected to produce as many as 200 new Ro-Ro vessels between 2023 and 2026.

Yet, pinning down exact figures is no easy task. China's intentionally opaque dual-use shipbuilding system makes it difficult for outsiders to determine how orders, technology transfers, or partnerships feed into Beijing's military buildup.

China's use of roll-on/roll-off (Ro-Ro) ships for defence purposes first drew attention in 2019, when the 15,000-ton ferry Bang Chui Dao took part in an amphibious assault exercise. Since then, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has steadily woven Ro-Ro vessels into its training. In July 2020, civilian ferries were used to launch amphibious

craft directly onto beaches, bypassing port facilities, in both day and night exercises off the coast of Guangdong.

A year later, in August 2021, the PLA expanded the concept further by employing a 10,000-ton-class civilian ferry in landing drills for the first time. The strategy became even more visible in August 2022, after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan heightened tensions. By 2023, their presence in military drills had become routine, with Ro-Ro ferries regularly featured in cross-strait transport exercises, including those held in July and September.

Moreover, the PLA Navy has incorporated civilian ferries into exercises, deploying them to carry amphibious units and release landing craft during mock beach invasions. Military planners have also tested refitting ordinary commercial ships to function as temporary helicopter carriers—a tactic crucial for expanding operational options in a major conflict.

The Military Edge: Dual-Use Innovation

Pentagon-affiliated analysts have repeatedly sounded the alarm about the risks associated with China's expanding dual-use maritime capabilities—and not without reason. Today, Beijing commands the world's largest navy by sheer numbers, surpassing even the United States in hull count. According to US Department of Defense assessments, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) maintains roughly 355 frontline vessels, organised into three major fleets along China's vast coastline.

By comparison, the US Navy operates about 305 frontline ships, with resources split roughly 60–40 between the Pacific and Atlantic theatres. Projections suggest that by 2030 the PLAN could add another 70 warships, while the US Navy—limited by budgets, industrial constraints, and political debates—may add only 42.

Even though the PLAN enjoys numerical superiority on paper, the contribution of China's civilian shipping sector could prove just as critical in a potential Taiwan campaign. Chinese military planning documents outline a phased approach to a cross-strait offensive. First, a joint firepower campaign—marked by concentrated missile strikes—would degrade Taiwan's air defences, command centres, and coastal fortifications. Only after this preparatory barrage would amphibious landings begin.

Here lies one of Beijing's most pressing vulnerabilities. Despite commanding the world's largest fleet by vessel numbers, the PLAN lacks the specialised amphibious lift capacity required for a full-scale cross-strait invasion. Currently, it fields around nine amphibious assault ships, 30 landing ship tanks (LSTs), 20 landing ship mediums (LSMs), and several dozen smaller landing craft. Over the past decade, modernisation has centred on inducting Yuzhao-class LPDs and Yushen-class LHAs. The navy has also introduced new landing craft designed to operate with these large platforms, alongside a limited number of new LSTs and LSMs replacing ageing vessels.

Even with years of sustained modernisation, the PLA lacks the lift and logistics capacity to mount a large-scale invasion of Taiwan. Analysts broadly agree that Beijing would need to land at least 300,000 troops to establish and hold a beachhead, yet its amphibious assets could deliver only a fraction of that. Reports suggest the PLAN's fleet could transport just one division—around 20,000 troops—in a single lift. Unless China significantly accelerates amphibious ship production, it will likely remain years away from acquiring the capacity required for such an operation.

The challenge does not end with landing

troops. Sustaining a beachhead demands a continuous flow of reinforcements, equipment, and supplies under heavy resistance. On this front, the PLAN's auxiliary fleet is severely limited. Even across the relatively short 106-kilometre Taiwan Strait, its support capacity would be stretched to the breaking point.

To compensate, China has increasingly turned to its civilian maritime sector, mobilising hundreds of commercial vessels for missions ranging from over-the-shore logistics and at-sea replenishment to casualty evacuation, medical support, and combat search and rescue.

Ro-Ro ships, equipped with stern ramps capable of loading and unloading vehicles directly onto docks or beaches, provide a flexible means of mass transport. Each vessel can reportedly carry around 300 vehicles and 1,500 personnel, making them an indispensable supplement to China's limited amphibious military assets.

Acknowledging this strategic utility, the PLA in 2012 established "strategic projection support ship fleets" within major shipyards, effectively weaving commercial shipbuilders into the fabric of China's military logistics network.

Recently, a fleet of large civilian cargo ships attracted media attention as it transited the Taiwan Strait, moving south from the Bohai Sea off northern China. The unusual voyage sparked speculation that the movement was linked to a potential joint amphibious landing exercise involving the PLA. The fleet consisted of seven Ro-Ro vessels operated by the Yantai-based Bohai Ferry Company in Shandong province. According to Maritime Optima, a real-time ship-tracking platform, the ships deviated from their normal commercial routes in the Bohai Sea—an anomaly that drew scrutiny from maritime analysts and regional security experts.

Such a deviation from standard shipping lanes is rare and suggests coordination beyond routine commercial activity. It also raised questions about whether the vessels were rehearsing logistics for military applications, such as the rapid transport of vehicles, equipment, and personnel. While there is no public confirmation that this fleet was engaged in an active military drill, the manoeuvre reflects Beijing's focus on integrating civilian maritime assets into broader strategic and operational planning.

In previous cases, similar vessels have been incorporated into PLA exercises to simulate amphibious operations, highlighting their dual-use potential. In May 2018, Chinese state media reported that a 10,000-metric-ton Ro-Ro vessel had been used by the PLA Air Force to transport officers, troops, and equipment over a distance of more than a thousand nautical miles along China's coastline. The report noted that the ship's owning company had worked closely with the PLA.

Such exercises, even if only preparatory, allow the PLA to test coordination, timing, and operational readiness for amphibious scenarios, including potential cross-strait contingencies.

In addition to the Ro-Ro fleet, new satellite imagery revealed earlier this year one of China's latest "invasion barges." These vessels feature temporary piers that can be linked to other ships via a series of barges, supported by jack-up systems for added stability. Analysts widely interpret the development of these barges as part of Beijing's preparations for a Taiwan contingency. Their emergence underscores the increasing incorporation of ostensibly civilian or non-military maritime assets into amphibious operations, further blurring the line between commercial infrastructure and military capability.

Moreover, the tracking of these vessels appears inconsistent or deliberately obscured, suggesting either that China

intends to limit public monitoring or that the ships may in fact be operated directly by the PLAN. In the past, dual-purpose ferries participating in military exercises alongside the PLA have frequently disabled their Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), preventing real-time tracking by commercial maritime platforms.

This supplementary capacity strengthens China's ability to support a potential invasion of Taiwan, but its utility extends well beyond that scenario. A hybrid force combining military and civilian amphibious assets offers flexibility, enabling rapid deployment in future operations across the Indo-Pacific. It also provides critical capabilities for disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and emergency logistics. In this way, China can project power while maintaining adaptability for non-combat contingencies.

The strategic importance of civilian vessels in expanding China's amphibious capabilities is further highlighted in the Pentagon's most recent annual report on Chinese military developments, released in December. The report states:

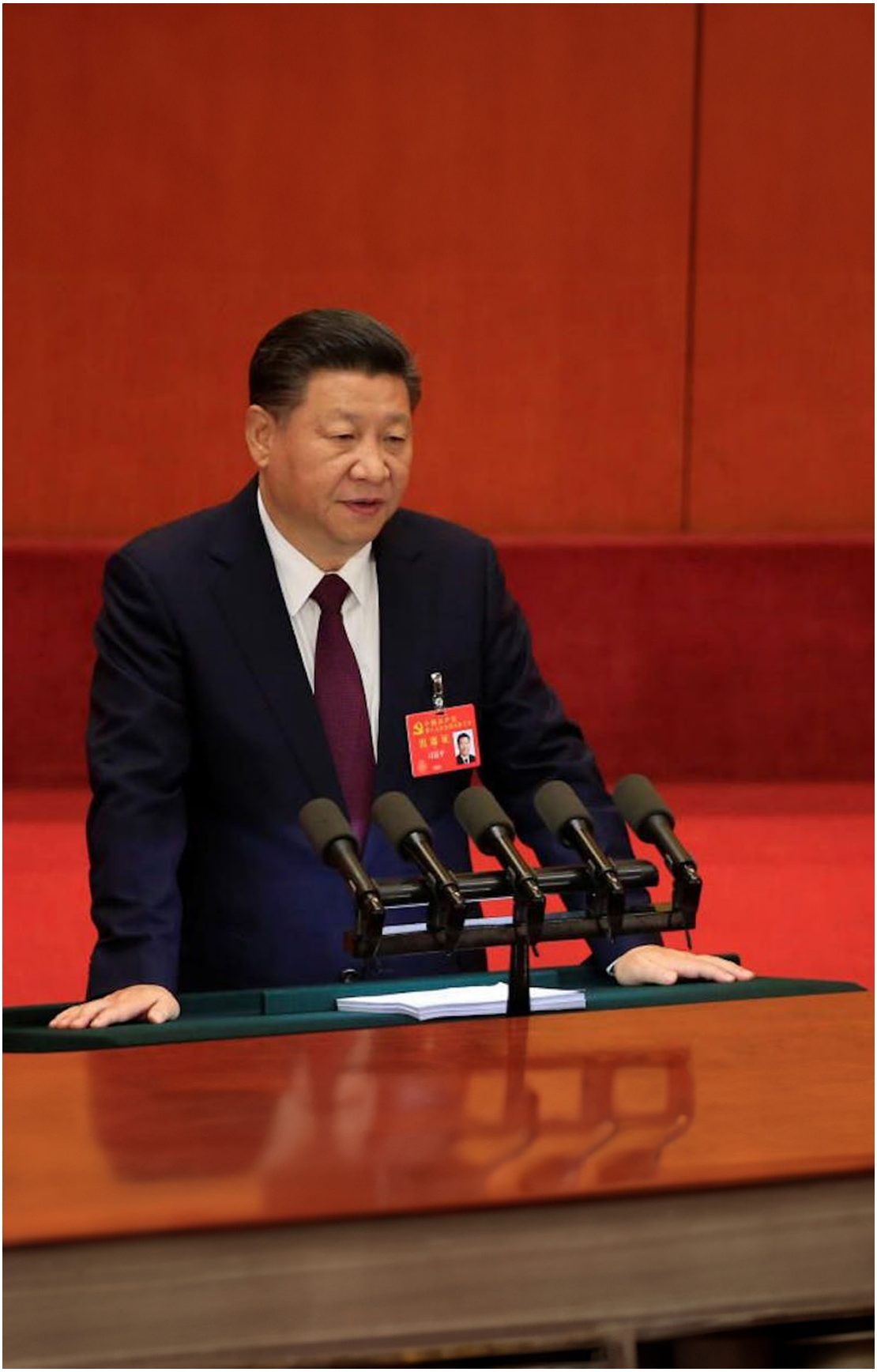
"Although the PLAN has not invested in the large number of landing ships and medium landing craft that analysts believe the PLA would need for a large-scale assault on Taiwan, it is possible the PLA assesses it has sufficient amphibious capacity and has mitigated shortfalls through investment in other operational capabilities, such as civilian lift vessels and rotary-wing assets to address this gap. The PLA may have confidence in the PRC's shipbuilding industry's massive capacity to produce the necessary ship-to-shore connectors relatively quickly."

The strategic utility of temporary piers in this context has drawn significant attention. When used alongside Ro-Ros and jack-up barges, these piers enable the rapid transfer of vehicles and equipment from ship to shore, extending the operational reach of China's amphibious forces. Their integration is likely a deliberate attempt to leverage dual-use maritime infrastructure to strengthen both the PLA's amphibious and logistical capabilities, while also providing flexible solutions for non-combat missions.

Yet civilian ships are not without limitations. In a combat scenario, these vessels would be slow-moving, highly vulnerable, and in need of protection against aircraft and warships armed with anti-ship missiles. Technical constraints add to these vulnerabilities. Vehicle lanes on commercial Ro-Ros may be too narrow for many tracked armoured vehicles, while internal features such as elevators restrict the types of vehicles that can be stowed on each deck.

One particular challenge lies in ramp design. Standard Ro-Ros have freight decks elevated well above the waterline to align with port quay walls. This makes them unsuitable for launching amphibious craft directly into the water. To overcome this, the PLA has retrofitted some Ro-Ros with specialised ramps designed for in-water operations, enabling amphibious combat vehicles to be launched and recovered more effectively.

In collaboration with shipbuilders, the military has also added modifications tailored to operational needs. These include helipads, medical facilities, upgraded command and communications systems, improved freight deck ventilation, and other enhancements designed to optimise dual-use performance. ■



Knowing and Feeling the "China Dream": Logic and Rhetoric in the Political Language of Xi's China

KERRY BROWN

Preparing for the Dream: Elite Leaders Speak at Party Anniversaries

"China Dream" is where both the language of fact and feeling elide. This can be illustrated by many different kinds of events and examples from the Xi era after 2012. One of the most striking was the celebration by the Communist Party of China of its 100th anniversary on 1 July 2021. On that day, Xi spoke of the CPC with a tone of confidence and assertiveness, and of it leading a country that had delivered modernity on its own terms. The CPC was now able to face the world as at least an equal, and perhaps even a superior. This was an achievement that clearly needed not just intellectual acknowledgement, but an appropriate emotional response too (Xi, 2021). On this anniversary, Xi was addressing a national Chinese audience where most listeners may not have bothered much about the formal ideology of the party and its specific doctrines and technical ideas, but where they were predominantly invited to respond to the increasing evidence that nationalistic feelings were a valid emotional response to the situation the entity the CPC represented – the nation China – was in. This "rejuvenated nation" spoken of that day, rather than the CPC itself, could arouse people's pride and affection because it was a worthy object of admiration and love through the size of its economy, the geopolitical impact it was having, the size of its military, and the physical transformation of its modernised landscape, along with its lauded cultural attributes. These were inevitably all things that Xi spoke of that day.

This specific performance showed where the Xi era and earlier Chinese times differed. Elite leaders in the past did not have this array of assets that Xi could deploy to trigger the happy, proud, nationalistic feelings of the public they spoke to, in order to "sell" its core message to them. For Mao, speaking at the very genesis of the PRC over seven decades

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before of its newness as a nation, the sources of happiness and the cultivation of love towards this new country were clearly things his language encouraged but more in terms of hope than current reality:

We are proclaiming the founding of the People's Republic of China. From now on our nation will belong to the community of the peace-loving and freedom-loving nations of the world and work courageously and industriously to foster its own civilization and well-being and at the same time to promote world peace and freedom. Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up. Our revolution has won the sympathy and acclaim of the people of all countries. We have friends all over the world. (Mao, 1949b)

The language here is about the future, of what "will" happen, and of how China "will no longer" be a certain thing. China may have "stood up" and won sympathy, but the onus is on how things will happen going forward, and how the "insult and humiliation" of the recent past will now be consigned to history.

In the far more institutionalised context of half a century later, Mao's successor but one as core leader, Jiang Zemin, could speak in stirring ways as Party Secretary and President in 2001. His confidence could come from the fact that the eighty-year-old party, having enjoyed half a century in power, had tangible evidence of its successes and contributions to draw on. While he had used this occasion to promote the main ideology associated with his era – the Three Represents (where private business entrepreneurs were eventually allowed to become CPC members) – he did so in language which was also aspirational and future-orientated, like Mao's:

In the new century, the great historical tasks for our Party are to continue the modernization drive, accomplish the great cause of the reunification of our motherland, safeguard world peace and promote common development. Facing the profound changes in the domestic and international situations, our Party should follow closely the progressive trends of the world and unite and lead people of all ethnic groups throughout the country in seizing the opportunities and taking up challenges to accomplish the three major historical tasks successfully. To this end, we must unswervingly fulfil the requirements of the "Three Represents." (Jiang, 2021)

This is the language of a great project, a work in progress. It is pragmatic, realistic, and almost humble in its tone. And here is the moment that Hu Jintao, ten years later, marking his own ideological innovation, Scientific Development, in his speech celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the CPC, tied everything to the hope and desire for national rebirth:

In contemporary China, only development counts, and this calls for pursuing scientific development. We should take scientific development as the goal and give priority to accelerating the shift of model of economic development…We will promote fairness and justice; long- term, steady and rapid economic development; and social harmony and stability. We will continue to make new and greater achievements in pursuing civilized development that leads to increased production, better lives for the people, and a sound ecosystem, and thus lay a more solid foundation for building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (Hu, 2011).

In all of these, the sense of aspiration, of bringing something about in terms of China's recreation, are clear – whether they be conveyed through Mao and the sense of victimisation and China standing up, or by Jiang's notion of historic tasks, reunification and modernisation, or by Hu and the construction of a rejuvenated, better society.

Each of the elite leaders spoke as much about the hopes for the future as they did about the present reality the country was in. Each was implicitly saying those good things that their listeners should like and feel happy about were going to happen because of changes in the current situation. Hope and desire are fundamental emotions. They contain evaluations of one of the most complex and unknowable things – the future. What none of these leaders did, however, was to deploy one of the most frequent terms used about thinking, and feeling, about the future – the word "dream."

Dreaming Together or Dreaming Alone

One of the reasons for this can be found in the ways "dreaming" links to the notion of an individual and a person. One can imagine even for an idealistic and Utopian such as Mao, using a word like "dream" would have raised uncomfortable echoes of the ultimate capitalist idea – "the American dream." Dreaming was something private, self-centred, and indulgent. The collectivist ethos underpinning Mao, Jiang, and Hu's statements is power- fully present. Their recognition, for instance, in each of the statements above that they were speaking in a moment when all Chinese people had worked together, committed to a common enterprise, either of national foundation or national reconstruction or national economic reopening. Emotions are clearly stirred in this language, and through the ambitions alluded to, but more on the social rather than the individual level. Despite the underlying similarities in terms of encouragement of key positive public emotions, built on a shared concentration on China the great nation and a shared narrative and understanding about its modern history, the context in which each of these statements was delivered was always changing and evolving. This essentially created the quandary for Xi when he became the core of the "fifth generation of leaders" in 2012. The Maoist society dominated by collectivist social organisation, mass campaigns, and strict enforcement of CPC norms and economic behaviour had dramatically changed after 1978. Economic liberalisation alone led to a transformed society, where, as Arthur Kleiman et al. (2011) recognised, by the end of the Hu era there was often rampant individualism, some of it verging on almost pathological hedonism. The rise of these new forms of individualism can be found in the radical changes in the country's material circumstances. From 1980 onwards, economic policies started to have impact. Specific results of these could be witnessed, measured, spoken about, and offered as evidence of success. These had tangibility. This is not to say that in the Mao era there were no material improvements in people's lives. But these material developments had also occurred in a complex situation where there were crises, from the famines of the early 1960s to the widespread social instability from 1966 onwards. Under Deng, commitment was made to simplifying the party and its elite leaders' key message, and their main mission – to make China materially wealthy while preserving the one-party system. Dense deployment of economic data became a key means of getting this message across, embodying the changes happening in people's lives, and conveying success. The dialectic/argument function dominated. People needed to be persuaded to engage in this practical process of national material enrichment, rather than aroused to feel in a certain way about larger, longer-term abstract national goals. The audience for elite leaders were ones that did not have to principally feel happy, angry, indignant, or bitter – but to simply produce. Language such as that produced by Hu Jintao in 2003 epitomises this, showing that statistics have taken control:

I know you are all interested in China's

current economic situation and future trends of development…. From 1978 to 2002, China registered an average annual GDP growth rate of 9.4%. In 2002, when world economy experienced a growth slowdown, Chinese economy grew by 8%. In the first half of this year, China's GDP went up by 8.2% despite the interruption by SARS. At present, China's economy remains in good shape with a strong momentum for expansion. The 7% increase target set for this year is well within reach (Hu, 2003). This is the message of the prudent accountant, not the leader of a party historically committed to revolutionary change. But it does display a communication strategy, where the audience is offered empirical evidence which can speak for itself, about how the country is progressing and growing. This is indeed the discourse of "seeking truth from facts" where there is an unproblematic relationship between what is described and what conclusions intellectually can be drawn from this. What linked Hu's language to that of Jiang and Mao was the sharing of a historic narrative of positive progressive development and the commitment to stimulating excitement about the future. The latter was where the most emotional energy was generated from – a sense of expectation and direction. In the "Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism" Daniel Bell (1976) had spoken of how capitalist societies were frequently infected by a constant fetishisation of the future. The future would always be better, things would be faster, easier, and more luxurious. This offers a common point with socialism with Chinese characteristics – a hunger for tomorrow not only being better but showing this in its results – the ever-climbing figure of GDP for example that always went up, never into recession. In the Mao foundational stage, there was a tomorrow at all in view of the horrific death and destruction that had preceded this during the Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War was, in itself, a positive and unifying message to give. It will, as Mao said in 1949, "lead the people of the whole country in surmounting all difficulties and undertaking large-scale construction in the economic and cultural spheres to eliminate the poverty and ignorance inherited from the old China" (Mao, 1949a), the place that everyone was fleeing from. As the PRC proceeded though, expectations also changed. It was no longer about simply surviving, though that remained important through many of the hardest Mao years, but eventually, after 1978, about prospering. Indeed, by the time of Hu, it started to be about even more than that – about thriving, and somehow dealing with the excesses of wealth and material goods that had been created.

Xi Jinping: Dreaming About Feeling Together

Clearly between the Hu and Xi eras there was a rethink of how the party was managing its public messaging. The dense and impersonal Hu era style was no longer adequate. There needed to be recognition that while promoting strong collective narratives and accepted facts and interpretation of the party's achievements was important, this was happening in a context where individualism in China was an unchangeable new reality. The party therefore had to create at least some kind of register where despite this profound change it could still mobilise and motivate people and create a language which did not just instruct but inspired and engaged not just on the public, collective level, but down to the individual. The era of the rhetoric/storytelling function had returned. In 2012, Xi deployed a different kind of language, using reference to his own life story, something Hu, Jiang, and Deng had never done and conveying the China story in a more concrete, less technocratic language. Speaking in Seattle during a visit to the US in 2015, he stated:

Towards the end of the 1960s when I was in

my teens, I was sent from Beijing to work as a farmer in a small village of Liangjiahe near Yan'an of Shaanxi Province, where I spent seven years. At that time, the villagers and I lived in "earth caves" and slept on "earth beds". Life was very hard. There was no meat in our diet for months. I knew what the villagers wanted the most. Later I became the village's party secretary and began to lead the villagers production. I understood their needs. One thing I wished most at the time was to make it possible for the villagers to have meat and have it often. But it was very difficult for such a wish to come true in those years. At the Spring Festival early this year, I returned to the village. I saw blacktop roads. Now living in houses with bricks and tiles, the villagers had Internet access. Elderly folks had basic old-age care and all villagers had medical care coverage. Children were in school. Of course, meat was readily available. This made me keenly aware that the Chinese dream is after all a dream of the people. We can fulfill the Chinese dream only when we link it with our people's yearning for a better life (Xi, 2015).

The statistics of the Hu era largely disappeared. Not just storytelling, but one in which Xi figures as an individual have come to the fore – albeit an individual with a strongly representative and symbolic function. Alongside this, more complex issues have been recognised, such as the need for cleaner governance within the party itself, the desire to address inequality through the common prosperity language from 2021, and the notion that China was seeking greater autonomy through its "dual circulation" policy from 2020. Nationalistic pride, however, was growing stronger, simply because through economic growth and geopolitical developments, the country had more to feel proud about. The political challenge for Xi and his colleagues was how to find the best language to encourage, and exploit, this pride, and to allow Chinese people to feel rather than just know about their country's achievements. This question of audience is a key one for any communication practice and strategy. It is striking that, for all the changes in people's daily lives in the country, and the rise of this individualism and social differentiation within society, both Mao and Xi talked of their serving and speaking directly to their core audience – the very generic notion of "the People." This term has remained remarkably static, despite all the changes going on around it. On 15 November 2012, when Xi emerged on the stage of the Great Hall of the People as the key leader, while setting out a number of core proposals for his new administration, he stated that "It is the people who create history." The party's task, he went on, was to "maintain close ties with the people" (BBC, 2012). This echoed the celebrated speech of September 1944, "Serve the People," when Mao had talked of "the common revolutionary objective" – to lift the suffering of the Chinese people (Mao, 1944). That they both said they were talking to this group is one thing. But what did they signify by this term? Surely conceptualisation of it had not remained unchanged over the decades? Of all the terms in Modern Chinese political discourse, in fact, few can be more contentious than that of "people" . The contemporary Chinese writer Yu Hua wrote that these characters "renmin" were both "remote, but …so familiar too" (Yu, 2012: 3). But he offered an excellent insight into something fundamental that had changed about what this term referred to, and why Xi's use of it was so different to Mao's. Once upon a time, Yu stated, during the Cultural Revolution, the definition of "the people" could not have been simpler, namely "workers, peasants, soldiers, scholars, merchants." But after that, "new vocabulary started sprouting up everywhere – netizens, stock traders, fund holders, celebrity fans, laid-off workers, migrant labourers and so on – slicing into smaller pieces the already faded concept that was 'the people'" (Yu, 2012: 6). The "people" had become atomised, complex and diverse.

For Mao, there were clear and elemental

moral distinctions between the "good" and the "bad" people, and that was all. You were an enemy or a friend. For Xi, the "people," the audience he spoke to might have still been figured as though they were one great collective. But his tone of almost self-deprecation and respect to this great mass, and the fact that Chinese people were clearly socially, culturally, and economically more diverse than ever before, marked a massive difference. "During the long process of history, by relying on our own diligence, courage and wisdom, Chinese people have opened up a good and beautiful home where all ethnic groups live in harmony and fostered an excellent culture that never fades," Xi stated. The use of "we" is rhetorically crucial here. Xi was speaking as one of those he was addressing. He was on the podium, for sure. But he was also asserting he was in the crowd listening too (BBC, 2012). Moving these people while recognising the vast complexity contained within them, trying despite this to speak directly to them, as one of them, recruiting them into a narrative carrying clear evaluations that will lead to emotional responses – these have clearly been major objectives of the Xi era. But as the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the CPC, made clear, when Xi spoke once more to his audience he used a crucial new term – the party, he stated, at a 100 years old, was not just in the business of thinking, or planning, or doing, but also dreaming – and doing so with confidence:

To realise national rejuvenation, the party has united and led the Chinese people in pursuing a great struggle, a great project, a great cause, and a great dream through a spirit of self- confidence, self-reliance, and innovation, achieving great success for socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. We Chinese are a people who uphold justice and are not intimidated by threats of force. As a nation, we have a strong sense of pride and confidence. We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people (Xi, 2021).

"Dream" is a profoundly significant term here. This issue of Chinese people being invited by their leaders to dream is a new development. It says something important about the evolution of the role of aspiration in contemporary China, and the space now being granted to it by political leaders – something that has grown from the language of previous elite leaders but which is now located in a very different context and with a different kind of content and usage. It also marks a deeper acceptance of the individualism of the people being spoken to, and of there needed to be acknowledgement of their having the agency to take this offer to "dream" and shape it to their own unique circumstances.

The act of dreaming itself as it occurs in Chinese literary and historic traditions is a well-attested one, and something that the contemporary discourse of a national and per- sonal dream calls on. In his excellent book on the China Dreamscape during the era from 300 BCE to 800 CE, Robert Ford Campany (2020) writes of the huge importance given through divination and a complex set of interpretative tools by Chinese writers and thinkers over this period to dreams. But looking at this history today one thing is certain: dreams have always been regarded as carrying meaning. "Questions about dreaming were inextricable bound up with questions about how best to live," Campany (2020: 67) writes.

Despite this, Mao himself seldom if ever mentioned dreams to address this issue of capturing aspirations, hopes, and desires about the future. He certainly did not convey

any of his more significant statements or slogans by referring to dreams. For much of the post-reform era, in many ways beyond standard patriotic language party elite leaders have almost withdrawn from speaking in an emotional register, but simply kept to the business of informing, ordering, and quantifying. Using the language of dreams therefore bespeaks an important shift – an acknowledgement that the party once more needs to get back into the business of arousing and inspiring emotions and using these as part of its political strategy.

Deploying the language of dreams certainly opens up interesting new spaces for political discourse in contemporary China. It does go some way towards solving the conundrum of how to accept the rise of individualism in society, and also the need to have language that can arouse people's feelings but do so in a way which is controllable by the party-state and hitched to its own goals. Appealing to dreams allows plenty of space for different sorts of evaluations of different kinds of reality – it is a very open and vague term. In the way the word is used by Xi, the one thing which is certain is that these qualities of being individual, varied and almost worldly are regarded as positive things. The party knows unlike in the Mao era it cannot command so easily but needs to carry at least some elements of persuasion. Inviting to dream is an uncontentious thing to do, especially as it does not need to say what the dream might specifically be about beyond better living standards, and a great, powerful, strong country. The main thing is to ensure that the dream itself can be a shared one. This is the way in which Xi spoke when he first deployed the term in 2013: "Everyone has an ideal, ambition and dream," he said. But then he went on, in an act of party appropriation: "In my opinion, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times." This is not just a thing shared by people at a particular time: "This dream embodies the long-cherished hope of several generations of the Chinese people, gives expression to the overall interests of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people, and represents the shared aspirations of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation" (Xi, 2014: 38). This elision of language from past eras about the aspirations the party's elite leaders expressed then, along with their accompanying emotions, and the context of a China that, after four decades of economic and material enrichment could now allow itself the luxury to dream, and to stand a chance of seeing those dreams come to reality, creates the peculiar sub-discourse within Xi speak for this term. In May 2013, he declared that "the Chinese dream pertains to the past and the present, but also the future." This idea of dreaming about the past belongs more to the traditional use of the term – much as people often dream in their sleep about what has happened to them. But the second definition of dreaming, which is closer to the sense of hoping, aspiring, and wishing for, is also important here – nodding to the future. So is the sense of tangibility:

> The Chinese dream is the dream of the country and the nation but also of every ordinary Chinese. One can only do well when one's country and nation do well…. The great renewal of the Chinese nation will eventually become a reality in the course of the successive efforts of youth (Xi, 2014: 53).

The situation of China today is, for Xi, best seen as also a dream fulfilled. We often hear that people of the Maoist era who survived into the current one feel that they would never have dreamed of China being in the position it is today, with the levels of development it has. But for a politician sitting at the top of the communist party, this is a complex story to gather into one phrase that can then generate positive emotions to go beyond simple intellectual acknowledgement. To compound the

challenge, the status of the party, the diversity of the audience, and the complexity coming from different technological platforms all mean that it is very hard to say one thing that will reach and speak to everyone and make them feel the way the party wants them to. Dreaming is one of the very few – a state of emotional receptivity, but without any overt emotions necessarily linked with it. One could dream and be happy, fulfilled, ecstatic, pleasantly confused, satiated, and thrilled – the choice is yours. The main thing is just to dream. The feelings start flowing after that.

Conclusion

Language both to communicate instructions, interpretations and facts, but also to promote a set of emotional responses has been an essential part of political life in contemporary China – as it has in any community. The Communist Party of China's five core elite leaders since 1949 have all used a mixture of language in their main communications which instructs, commands, and informs, but also aims to inspire, mobilise people listening emotionally, and create emotions ranging from love to hate, and fear to pride. This does not mean these kinds of languages are utterly distinct from each other. As Solomon's work argues, emotions are evaluations of situations and circumstances, albeit complex ones, and ones with a logic of their own.

The CPC's leadership, through its language used at core public occasions such as celebrations of party anniversaries, illustrates the evolution of the relationship between language to inform, and language to inspire and talk to people's emotions, over the last eighty years. While Mao certainly did deploy terms laden with reference to victimisation, Chinese standing up, and the need for a new sense of pride and hope, for Deng, Jiang and Hu, the commitment to a more prosaic politics of building better material lifestyles meant that while a sense of nationalism was present in their language, the principal aim was to direct, report tangible economic success, and show evidence that China was indeed modernising and growing stronger.

These political and social changes have ended up with a society which is very different from that in the Maoist era, and where there are far higher levels of individualism and self- expression. Even so, under Xi Jinping, the party elite leadership language has used "dream" as a term that can at least address the strong feelings of satisfaction and love of the strong Chinese nation that have resulted from the economic and material changes in the country since the 1980s. "Dreaming" is a key part of the Xi era discourse, revealing how important not just actions, information, and presentation by the party of what it wants to have accepted as facts are, but also how key feelings are, arising from the evaluation of these other facts. Just as there are clearly right and wrong ways to regard policy and political options in con- temporary China, so there are also right and wrong ways to feel about these things. This shows the ambition of the Xi era – that it is willing not just to assert its own reality, but its own account of whether to feel happy or sad about that reality. ■

Narco Economies in the Mekong in the Chinese Shadow

PRIYANKA GARODIA

Introduction

The infamy of the Golden Triangle has been recorded in history. The intersection of the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand has long been associated with illicit economic activities. An erstwhile production centre for Opium and Heroin smuggling, it has evolved into a complex arena of drug production, a money laundering haven through casinos, and a cyber-scam enclave. There are no rules when it comes to the Golden Triangle - hybrid polities are at play, where militias, warlords, and business moguls, often in collusion with state actors, use illicit economies to govern. Scholars have been calling this region a growing laboratory of criminal sovereignties.

Given the rising influence of China in Southeast Asia - the rise of such sovereignties presents both vulnerabilities and an opportunity. The influence of the Golden Triangle has permeated into Chinese society with methamphetamines, digital scams and human trafficking spilling into Chinese borders but these ventures along the Mekong also serve it with a unique opportunity to create an alternate security framework in the region. China's present posture towards the Golden Triangle reflects this security dilemma - should it come down hard on these illicit criminal zones to protect its domestic interests, or should it use them as instruments of regional influence generation?

It should also be noted that Southeast Asian countries are not passive recipients. They often deploy these sovereignties to balance ties with both China and the United States, who have been enmeshed in an intense geopolitical rivalry in the region.

What are Criminal Sovereignties?

Criminal sovereignties are hybrid political orders that emerge from illicit criminal action. These actors that include militias, warlords, business people perform core governance tasks and maintain societal order. Militias mostly adjudicate disputes, enforce taxation and act as regulators of the market.

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The business class provides employment and infrastructure whereas corrupt government officials recognise this entire system. They are anarchic voids but rather a space where crime and governance overlap to produce an alternate order that generates both revenue and relative stability in fragile states.

It is this duality that must be recognised when studying this geopolitical corridor along the Mekong - to view it as a lawless arena would lead to instability and chaos. What appears as disorder from a formal state-centred viewpoint is, in fact, an alternate form of order.

The Evolution in Crime Along the Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle and its actors have not remained - they have adapted to shifting market conditions, technological developments and geopolitical conditions. With each shifting epoch, newer actors, newer methods of governance have evolved. Each time period comes with new contraband, new actors, and newer forms of governance. The shifting market and geopolitical conditions, however, have not changed the underlying logic to the region - illicit economies create political authority when the state is weak or absent.

The 1950s to the 1980s laid the foundation with opium cultivation and circulation. Myanmar's Shan state with figures like Khun Sa garnered infamy and created a proto state that was financed solely with heroin production and sale. Sa's organisation was central in raising armies, implementing taxation, and providing services like healthcare and schools - all activities performed by the state. Sa managed to create a global drug empire that secured him wealth and infamy. His reign was one of the earliest examples of how sovereignty could be built using narcotics.

The early 2000s saw this trade adapt to the production of methamphetamine. This was facilitated by military bodies like the United WA State Army (USWA) of Myanmar that created an industrialised production hub of this drug in the Golden Triangle, creating laboratories and a global distribution network. The USWA was successful in setting up small state-like enclaves that included bureaucracies, customs, and major trade links into China's Yunnan province. Methamphetamine was a far more scalable and profitable drug than opium, giving such militias grounds to consolidate their standing and wreaking havoc across Asia.

The development of technology and the digital age of present times led to a significant change in operations in the Golden Triangle. Since 2015, small townships in these areas have been able to transform themselves into illicit economies that tap into digital developments - casinos, cyber-scam operations like pig butchering, human trafficking, and money laundering through cryptocurrency have become operational. These activities are not covert and happen in broad daylight. Towns such as Mong La and Bokeo are examples of such "smart cities" and "special economic zones" that use unethical labour practices, duping people on grounds of employment and creating a facade of modernity and freedom to disguise one of the largest rings of illegal transnational narcotics trade and human trafficking. Recent reports from the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) that was established in 2007 suggest that wildlife trafficking including cultivation of tiger farms are carried out here as well.

One simply needs to stroll along the banks of the Mekong River, near the Bokeo province of Laos to see an open environment of crime and debauchery. With gambling becoming illegal in Macau, Laos has emerged as the foremost place for casinos and gambling. The shops in the GTSEZ openly sell Tiger Wine - a Chinese delicacy made from the bones of a tiger, ivory

bracelets derived from tusks of elephants and other novelty items all indicating illegal wildlife activity. What is of relevance here is that China's presence is prominent in these areas - the Yuan is the currency of exchange, the sign boards are in Chinese, and most restaurants serve Chinese food including most of the patrons being Chinese business men who can easily access these cities with cars or flights. Most of the owners of these casinos and other ventures are ex-Triad members. Thus, the re-engineering of the criminal sovereignties of the Golden Triangle has not happened without Chinese permission.

The Golden Triangle Criminal Network decypher.

Actor	Region	Main Illegal Activities	Features
Mong La	Myanmar (Shan State, near China border)	- Casinos - Online gambling - Money laundering	- Operates in Mandarin - Trades in yuan - Relies on Chinese telecoms - Regulated by local militias rather than Naypyidaw
Shwe Kokko SEZ	Myanmar (Karen State)	- Cyber-scam compounds - Human trafficking - Fraud	- Joint venture of Karen Border Guard Force + Chinese investors (ties to ex-Triad boss Wan Kuok-koi) - Marketed as "smart city"
Kokang & United Wa State Army (UWSA)	Myanmar (northern Shan State)	- Industrial methamphetamine production (crystal meth, yaba tablets)	- Fortified enclaves with militaries, taxation, customs, and trade links into Yunnan - "states within a state"
Bokeo SEZ / Kings Roman Casino	Laos (Bokeo Province, along Mekong)	- Gambling - Drug trafficking, - Wildlife smuggling - Money laundering	- Run by Chinese businessman Zhao Wei - Sanctioned by U.S. Treasury - Operates with Lao government approval

TABLE 1: MAJOR CITIES IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE CRIMINAL NETWORK

China's Stakes in the Matter: Domestic vs Strategic Goals

China remains ambivalent to the presence of these criminal networks. While Beijing does acknowledge the danger of having these enclaves so close to their borders, especially given the easy penetration of methamphetamine into Yunnan, which has caused severe harm to Chinese communities and cybercrime operations using Chinese telecommunication networks to defraud its citizens. It also allows these activities to flourish with steady investment, surveillance and a controlled engagement with the fragile states that neighbour it to leverage Chinese influence. This has resulted in a structural dilemma for China that does not allow it to completely eradicate these entities without tensions on its borders. However, while these activities continue to take place, China cannot deny its enablement in them as well.

China has adopted a strategy of selectiveness that allows it to display outrage when domestically needed and turning a blind eye, when matters of regional influence come into play. This is evidenced by its crackdown on the activities of the area following the 2011 Mekong massacre, where 13 Chinese nationals were killed and China deployed joint patrols with Laos, Myanmar and Thailand to manage affairs. Crackdowns on scam centres in Myanmar and Thailand prove that Beijing is willing to get its hand dirty when need be.

This ambivalence exposes a larger structural paradox that faces China today. Its stately duties do not allow it to let its citizenry get victimised but as a regional power it cannot break such enclaves, which have become integral to its influence in Southeast Asia. Destabilising fragile states and border areas, while creating chaos among the militia outfits in this region are outcomes that China does not want. The client regime it has established in both Laos and Myanmar cannot be imagined without engaging with these criminal sovereignties. Thus, China borders between co-option and policing. While these zones are harmful, they also serve larger Chinese interests and cannot be eradicated as easily.

The Mekong River and its Strategic Implications for China

The Mekong River binds the geopolitical narrative of the Golden Triangle together. Its vast presence across Tibet from Yunnan into Southeast Asia's mainland is central to illicit and legal economic activities in the region. It is used for transportation purposes, agriculture and fisheries while simultaneously being used to smuggle narcotics, people, timber and wildlife. Given its geographical vitality, it is the perfect route for smuggling and discreet movement of goods. For China, the river makes Yunnan especially vulnerable to contraband.

The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the regular patrolling units are China's way of ensuring things remain under control. The LMC framework creates an extensive programme of dam building that allows China to wield a form of hydrological power over downstream states. The capacity to withhold and release water offers Beijing a profound form of political control in the region that is heavily dependent on the river for its livelihood.

The river is deeply entangled in the snares of the criminal sovereignties that operate in the region, whether it be casino towns like Mong La or Bokeo. The river and its tributaries are used as transportation and a marketplace for trade. The Mekong has emerged as a securitised frontier as seen above since 2011.

What is notable is that Southeast Asian countries have not taken to China as easily. Laos has welcomed Chinese investment partnerships, but it also engages with the United States - China's largest enemy globally. They have signed the Mekong-U.S. partnership, which allows some autonomy from Chinese influence. A similar stance has been adopted by Myanmar, while dependent on Chinese investment, it maintains limited engagement with Western countries. The Mekong in all has emerged as a securitised arena where regional and global interests are playing out.

Thus, the Golden Triangle manifests the great power rivalry between the United States and China where competing narratives are promoted. While the Chinese present themselves as a guarantor of economic growth with an emphasis on infrastructure development and shared development, the United States seeks to curtail the criminal excesses of the region by promoting the rule of law, good governance

initiatives and transnational crime reduction - more of which will be discussed later. This makes the Golden Triangle not simply an area of crime and drug production but a geopolitical arcade where great power compete, Hydro politics plays out and small fragile states partake in hedging to maintain some degree of autonomy.

Examining U.S. Interests in the Region

Distance does not keep the U.S. at bay when it comes to matters in the Golden Triangle. The nature of the transnational crimes being committed here mostly target rich white American males, especially the cyberscams. The U.S. has imposed sanctions on figures like Zhao Wei and multiple Myamarie military leaders - all implicated in crimes like trafficking, smuggling, pig butchering and running scam centres.

The United States has also been insistent on maintaining rule of law through governance reforms, anti-trafficking measures and capacity-building programmes as implemented under the Mekong-U.S. Partnership. While this highlights a very normative engagement of the U.S. based on promotion of human rights and creating legitimacy for these states, there is a geopolitical motive behind its engagement as well.

Firstly, the United States has been posturing itself as a counter-balancer to China's selective enforcement policy in the region. While these criminal sovereignties are co-opted by the Chinese to advance its strategic needs, the United States projects itself as a global player that plays by the book. It champions itself as protector of the region, whether these countries want this protection or not is a debate for another time.

Secondly, it presents issues along the lines of human rights violations. Whether it be the environmental decay of the Mekong with all the dams China is building, or protecting its citizens from losing billions of dollars in cyber scams annually.

However, the endurance of these criminal sovereignties is commendable. While they use hedging as a tactic to balance the interests of both China and the United States, their tolerance by local governments makes these entities difficult to contain. The result is a stalemate-like situation where these sovereignties endure in the region.

Beyond Security and Geopolitics: The Human Cost of Crime

While the Golden Triangle is a highly securitised region, the hybrid system that has emerged in the area has wider implications for society. Firstly, the criminal sovereignties that have emerged here warrant a reconsideration of what sovereignty is. The traditional, unitary and territorial view of sovereignty as encoded in the states has been thrown into flux in the region. The sovereignty seen in the Golden Triangle is multiple, hybridised and very often commodified. Order in these societies are negotiated with militias, business entities and the state who co-govern. Authority is not centralised here and dispersed across multiple actors that defies conventional practices.

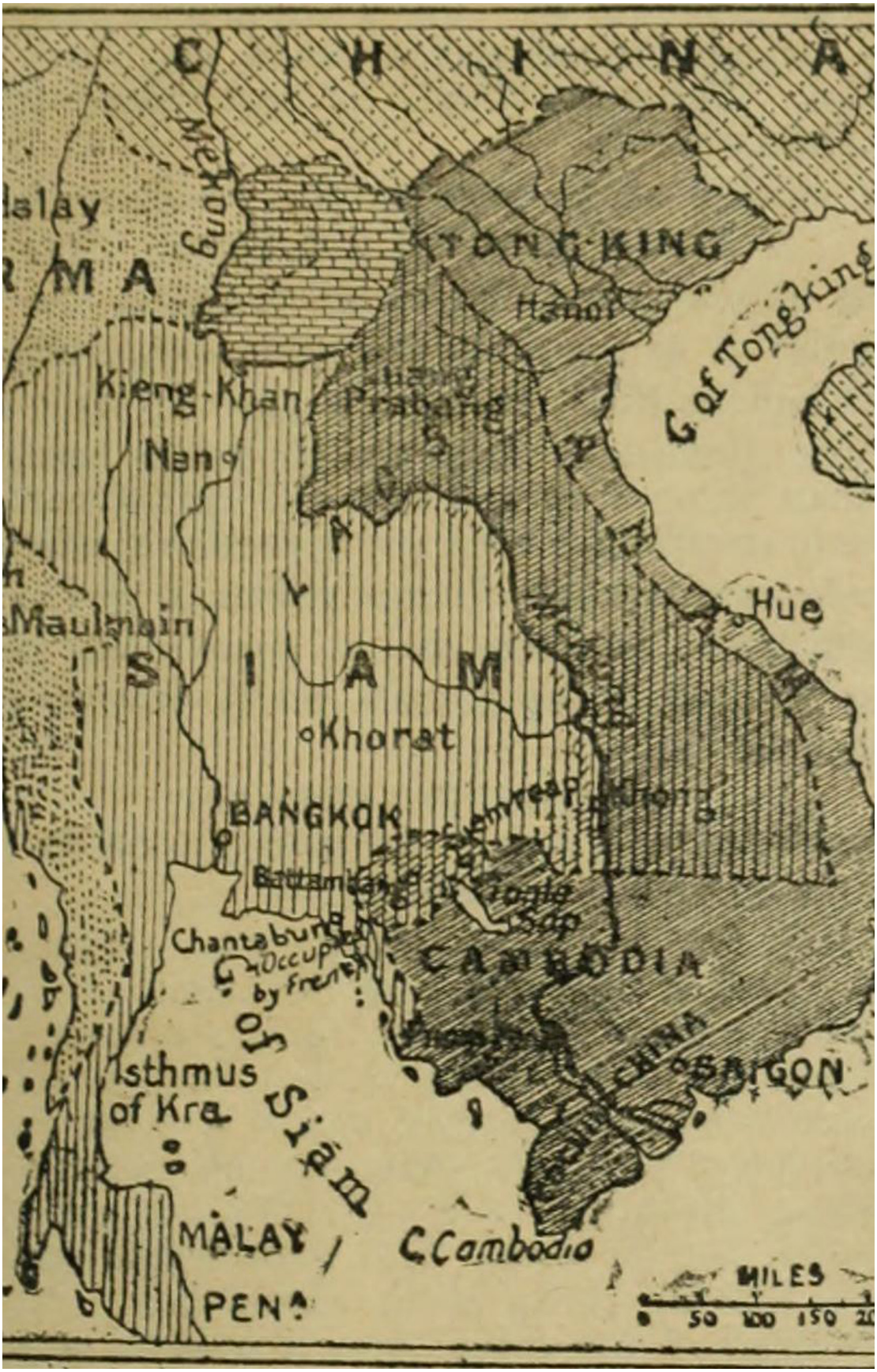
Secondly, these criminal sovereignties are highly reflexive. They have evolved with the technological development of the world. They use modern currencies like crypto to facilitate a vast network of financial transactions that circumvent most anti-money laundering measures. They have become adept in the use of artificial intelligence, deepfakes and creating fake

identities to create a vast network of duping. Technology has been wielded by these sovereignties with resilience and effectiveness.

Thirdly, these sovereignties are built on human suffering. Whether it be the cyber scam centres that run mostly by trafficked workers from parts of South America, Africa and Asia who are duped on false pretence of work and inducted into a system characterised by mental torture, physical abuse and psychological damage. Myanmar, Laos, Indonesia all grapple with the effects of easily available meth and Yaba tablets, bringing with it all the trauma associated with addiction at the personal, familial and societal level.

Conclusion

The paradox of criminal sovereignties and their functioning is best exemplified by the Golden Triangle. They are detrimental to states, while simultaneously ensuring their survival. For the Chinese, the Golden Triangle represents an often-obvious example of its transactional political engagements with the world order. On the one hand, it seeks to create a safer world with deeper regional engagements as laid down in their Global Security Initiative (GSI), on the other it tolerates some of the most heinous criminal activities that take place an hour away from its borders. The geopolitical dimension, where the United States feels compelled to enter the fray due to the cost of these criminal operations on its citizenry has forced smaller Southeast Asian states to become part of the great power rivalry of the 21st century. ■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From Make in China to Create in China

SHIVANI SINGH

The creation of an intellectual property system in China is among the most notable developments in the world economy in recent decades. Intellectual property was nonexistent in the People's Republic until the late 1970s. The idea of private rights in innovations or creative works was alien to a socialist system where information was a shared property. It was incompatible with the Maoist belief that invention belonged to the masses and not to any one person.

Everything began to change in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping introduced a strategy known as the "Reform and Opening-Up" that opened the door for international investment. Foreign businesses, especially those with advanced technology, have made it clear that they will not invest in China unless the law protects them. Collaboration was conditioned on technological safety. Under pressure from abroad, Beijing started creating a legal framework to protect intellectual property, not so much to protect Chinese innovators as to reassure its international partners that China would no longer be a free-for-all for copying.

With the enforcement of Trademark Law of 1982 and the Patent Law of 1984, the first parts came together. The safeguards were limited by international norms. Entire industries, including chemicals, food, and pharmaceuticals, were not covered by patents. Instead of encouraging a culture of innovation at home, the laws served as a means of indicating a readiness to abide by international regulations. This early framework was completed by the Copyright Law of 1990, which once again reflected international standards above regional ones.

In pursuit of membership to the WTO in the late 1990s and early 2000s, China took a number of steps, the most prominent of which were the acceptance of the TRIPS Agreement. This, in return, forced China to impose stricter regulations. In 1992, China added the patent of drugs and chemicals and in 1993, copyright on software. By the time of its accession in 2001, China's patent system within the decade had undergone radical reform as a result of its membership. However, the motivation to do so was externally driven and served to meet obligations as set forth on China.

The most crucial next step was Enforcement. There were many complaints from the government and foreign companies regarding the increasing counterfeiting and piracy. In return, China took steps to show that they were serious. In 2008, they added the compulsory licensing and protection

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of designs to the Patent Law. In 2010, the Copyright Law was revised so that technology piracy became a crime. The 2013 Trademark Law was a legislative solution to the problem of "trademark squatting," and in 2014, the setting up of special IP courts in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou reflected steps towards more professional decision-making.

By the mid-2010s, the focus had shifted from merely satisfying foreign interests to becoming a cornerstone of industrial policy. Initiatives like Made in China 2025 and the following Five-Year Plans transformed intellectual property into a key driver of technological advancement. The updates made to the 2020 Patent Law, which introduced higher statutory damages, a patent linkage system for pharmaceuticals, and improved design protection, were clear indicators of this shift. Copyright laws were also updated to keep pace with the digital era, particularly concerning streaming and webcasting. This evolution unfolded against the backdrop of the U.S.-China trade war, highlighting how external pressures and domestic ambitions influenced each other.

China continues to view patents differently from most countries in the world. Patents are more of an instrument of policy than an area of law, which is static in nature. In the 80s, it was an instrument of investment attraction. In the era of the WTO, it was a question of compliance. Now it is about upgrading the industry and asserting technological dominance.

China's achievement in 2022 is particularly striking. Chinese patent filers applied for 1.59 million patents, more than any individual country. This is twice the number of filings from Japan, South Korea, and the United States combined in a single year. Since the year, 2018, China's patent office has been the busiest in the world. However, numbers tell only a part of a richer history. Critics talk of patent bubbles, which purely depend on incentives and a focus on accumulating intellectual property for subsidies, or a desire to meet innovation targets, which emphasise the patenting process rather than the quality. Recent changes are a signal that Beijing understands quality matters. China is focused on increasing the high-value patents owned, improving the system of damages awarded, and enhancing the licensing practices of the country. This system partially serves the needs of the Private rights and the broader goals of the state. In China, IP is seen as a pillar of the country's system of innovation, industrial expansion and global dominance.

Tariffs, Technology, and the Geopolitics of Innovation

The emergence of intellectual property as the legal framework of China's rise, alongside the functional prowess of tariffs as both enablers and impediments to the country's technology growth, is quite telling. Tools of crude protectionism and revenue sources are now regarded as sophisticated instruments of technological statecraft in the twenty-first century. The sharpest expression of this new function of tariffs is the trade warfare between China and the US.

It was during the Trump administration that the US-China trade war 'officially' began in 2018. The attempt to reduce America's bilateral trade deficit with China rapidly metamorphosed into a skirmish over technology and intellectual property. The Office of the United States Trade Representative in March 2018 published the Section 301 Report, outlining accusations against China regarding technology transfers, discriminatory licensing practices, and the inadequate protection of foreign intellectual property. Advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, and robotics were some of the sectors that Washington's tariffs covered, which were imposed on Chinese goods worth hundreds of billions

of dollars. In retaliation, Beijing imposed tariffs on critical minerals that global targets employed to manufacture military weapons, automobiles, and semiconductors.

This was not a normal tariff dispute. From the beginning, it was also about technology policy. With the purpose of slowing China's ascent up the global value chain, Washington sought to slow the import of Chinese electronics, machinery, and components. Beijing also countered the tariffs with state subsidies and invested in 5G, electric vehicles, and robotics. Along with the trade balance, tariffs also became tools to determine the direction of technological competition. Trade balance and investment became increasingly interchangeable.

The industry of semiconductors became the most important battleground. China, the biggest consumer of chips, has a unique vulnerability as a result of U.S. pressure. Advanced semiconductors, on which China heavily depends, are imported. U.S. tariffs and export controls on high chips and manufacturing put heavy pressure on Huawei, SMIC, and China as a whole. These actions also raised difficult questions under international trade law. WTO members are mostly protected by the bound rates and tariffs, which are justified by Trade II exceptions under the GATT. The unique exception is Article 21, which allows restrictions for "essential security interests" protection. The United States has invoked this clause to defend its tariffs and export controls, a move that underscores the convergence of trade and national security policy. Although WTO panels have historically avoided challenging states on security grounds, recent disputes have tested the limits of Article XXI.

China challenged the U.S. tariffs at the WTO, and in September 2020, a panel ruled that the Section 301 measures violated WTO rules. It rejected Washington's argument that the tariffs were justified responses to unfair trade practices. The panel found that the United States had not shown that its actions could be defended under Article XX(a) of the GATT 1994, and therefore concluded the tariffs breached Articles I:1, II:1(a), and II:1(b). In essence, the WTO determined that the U.S. measures against China were both discriminatory and excessive, and that no valid legal exemption had been demonstrated.

Beyond litigation, tariffs have been folded into the industrial strategies of both countries. In the United States, they are linked to reshoring and supply-chain security, reflected in the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, which provides subsidies for domestic semiconductor manufacturing. In China, these tariff dynamics dovetail with industrial strategies such as Made in China 2025, a state blueprint aimed at localising production and reducing dependence on foreign technologies. The link between tariffs and intellectual property becomes clear in this context. Duties on advanced technologies often push foreign firms to localise production inside China, typically through joint ventures or licensing arrangements that involve the transfer of intellectual property. Yet the same tariffs can also discourage entry, narrowing cross-border flows of technology.

The power dynamics between licensors and licensees are always changing due to this tension. A robotics company in the US whose exports to China incur a 25 per cent tariff, for example, might find it easier and more profitable to license the patents to a company in China or set up a subsidiary there. Tariffs, in this instance, not only change the route of trade but also change the structure of the trade's intellectual property agreements. They are also indirect trade policy instruments, changing the business and legal practices of a country well beyond the trade borders.

From Beijing's perspective, the sustained focus on tariffs mandated the self-strengthening of the country's technology capabilities. State policy has, therefore, given priority to the domestic robotics, automation and semiconductor industries that have been heavily reliant on foreign technology. Evidence emerging from relations with the US suggests that export tariffs on highly advanced humanoid and service robots have created a dual effect. Consumer prices have climbed significantly in the US due to the trade tariffs, and the US export policy has also softened. There is a clear irony in this scenario. Policies that are ostensibly created to contain China's technological progress have, in fact, stacked the odds on China's self-sufficiency.

From simple economic levers, tariffs have evolved into instruments of legal and geopolitical engineering, shaping markets, intellectual property flows, and industrial policy at once. What emerges is a blurred terrain where trade law, security strategy, and innovation policy converge, placing intellectual property at the centre of geopolitical contestation.

Tariffs and Robots: Industrial Policy in Action

One of the industries that better exemplifies the implications of the intertwining of tariffs and trade with technology is the robotics industry. Over the last two decades, China has not only become the largest world market for industrial robots but also a significant producer. This dual of consumer and producer roles makes the robotics technology a particularly rich one for understanding how trade and law argue in the world's technological competition.

According to the International Federation of Robotics, in the year 2023, China installed a record high of 276,288 industrial robots, which constitutes 51% of the world's industrial robot installations. China's stock of operating robots has surpassed that of Japan and the United States as a result of the overwhelming demographic changes, increasing labour costs, and diligent government action. Targeted policies such as the "Made in China 2025" and the "14th Five-Year Plan" consider robotics as a key export industry in China's drive towards higher automation and productivity.

Despite these achievements, foreign companies remain dominant in high-end robotics markets. Firms such as FANUC of Japan, ABB of Switzerland, and Germany's KUKA retain strong positions in the production of precision components, robotic arms, and advanced control systems. Chinese companies, including Estun Automation, Siasun, and EFORT Intelligent Equipment, are gradually expanding their capabilities, but the sector remains heavily reliant on foreign suppliers for critical technologies. This dependence has made robotics a particularly sensitive area in the context of U.S.-China trade frictions.

During the trade war, the United States imposed tariffs of up to 25 per cent on a wide range of Chinese machinery and robotics-related imports (818 products). These measures targeted industrial robots, motors, controllers, and precision components under the Harmonised System classification. China retaliated with tariffs on U.S. robotics equipment and components, but its reliance on imported technologies limited the effectiveness of these countermeasures. The result was a disruption of supply chains that raised costs for U.S. manufacturers and, at the same time, incentivised Chinese firms to accelerate domestic substitution.

The effect of such tariffs extended past just raising prices within a specific timeframe. For U.S. manufacturers, such as in automotive and electronics, the duties

effectively increased the price of Chinese robots, thus lowering competitiveness in labour-intensive industries. At the same time, these endured in China, as it emphasised the need to develop local capability. State procurement, subsidies, and legal restructuring are intended to spur local innovation, thus lowering reliance on imports. Reports in 2024 and 2025 indicate that tariffs and export control policies significantly delayed the entry of advanced humanoid and service robots to the United States, resulting in even higher prices because of inflated tariffs.

The effects of tariffs on intellectual property documents are diverse and often neglected. Foreign companies employ different strategies when the cost of exporting robotic arms increases because of tariffs. They often start by licensing complex IP like patents, trade secrets, and software to a Chinese company that will engage in local production. Another strategy involves the formation of joint ventures with Chinese partners and thus relocation of the production, in order to evade the duties. Others focus more on less tariff-sensitive industries like software, services, and after-sales support. They all require complex legal frameworks. While joint ventures present concerns about ownership, contributions, and intellectual property rights, licensing entails compliance with Chinese contract law and technology transfer regulations.

Foreign businesses seeking steady returns in China now find licensing deals more appealing as a result of the 2020 amendments. Tariffs, on the other hand, have served as an indirect means of technology transfer, encouraging international businesses to transfer intellectual property locally rather than sending goods overseas.

Although this outcome is in line with Beijing's long-standing emphasis on indigenous innovation, its compelled dissemination of cutting-edge technology has alarmed Washington and Brussels.

From the perspective of legal reasoning, robotics tariffs can be explained as regulatory tools with extraterritorial implications. They redefine not only market prices but also the conditions of intellectual property trade. This is a question of significant legal importance. First, are tariffs compatible with WTO law? Disputes such as United States Tariff Measures on Certain Goods from China (DS543) suggest that unilateral tariffs often exceed WTO commitments. Second, can robotics be classified as a dual-use technology relevant to national security, thereby justifying exceptions under GATT Article XXI? Both the United States and China have, at times, invoked security rationales in the robotics sector, but the scope of the exception remains contested. Third, do tariffs blur the line between voluntary and coerced technology transfer, potentially contravening the spirit of TRIPS Article 27, which prohibits discrimination by field of technology?

The strategic consequences of these dynamics are profound. For the United States, tariffs have slowed the inflow of low-cost Chinese robotics equipment but increased costs for domestic manufacturers, potentially undermining competitiveness. For China, tariffs have accelerated its long-term goal of achieving self-sufficiency in robotics and automation, reinforcing its industrial policies. As robotics evolves toward AI-driven humanoids and service applications, the interplay between tariffs and intellectual property will only intensify. Standards-essential patents for robotics interfaces, copyright in machine learning models, and software licensing will likely become new battlegrounds in the techno-legal rivalry.

Law, International Law and the National People's Congress

China's rise as a technological power has unfolded within, and often against, the framework of international economic law. Intellectual property has been central to this process, both as a mechanism of compliance and as a site of contestation. When China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, it accepted the obligations of the TRIPS Agreement, which required sweeping reforms across patents, trademarks, and copyright. These included expanding the scope of patentable subject matter, strengthening enforcement mechanisms, and revising copyright law to align with Berne Convention standards. Although China formally complied, foreign governments and firms frequently criticised the gap between legislation and enforcement. Weak criminal thresholds, selective prosecutions, and policies encouraging technology transfer kept China on the U.S. Trade Representative's "Priority Watch List" for intellectual property violations from the late 1990s onward.

This tension between legal compliance and enforcement flexibility surfaced in multiple WTO disputes. In China- Measures Affecting the Protection and Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights (DS362), the United States challenged China's high thresholds for criminal liability and its handling of counterfeit goods. In 2009, the WTO ruled that several of China's practices were inconsistent with TRIPS. That same year, in China-Publications and Audiovisual Products (DS363), a panel upheld U.S. claims that Chinese restrictions on foreign cultural products violated both TRIPS and China's market access commitments. These cases revealed the dual character of China's approach: compliance on paper but significant discretion in practice.

Technology transfer has long been one of the most contested aspects of the global intellectual property regime. TRIPS explicitly identifies technology transfer as a legitimate policy objective under Article 7. Yet Western governments have argued that China's joint venture requirements and localisation rules amount to coercion, undermining the principle of voluntary licensing. The U.S.-China trade war magnified this tension. In 2020, a WTO panel decided in United States Tariff Measures on Certain Goods from China (DS543) that the U.S. tariffs imposed under Section 301 breached fundamental WTO commitments on tariff bindings and most-favoured-nation treatment. However, Washington justified its actions as a reaction to what it called China's unfair intellectual property tactics, transforming intellectual property disputes into a justification for unilateral trade reprisal. The dispute revealed a deeper divide: intellectual property was no longer just a matter of enforcement or licensing. The legitimacy of the international trading system was now intrinsically linked to it.

Since that time, Washington and Beijing have increasingly relied upon national security as a legal justification for extraordinary measures in sensitive technologies. The United States has invoked GATT Article XXI to justify its tariffs and export control regime over semiconductors, 5G, and robots, and China has accordingly strengthened export controls over rare earths and graphite, alleging essential security. The broader interpretation of exemptions under the WTO obligations adds more uncertainty to the legal predictability of WTO law. Drawing from 'national security' as a façade for economic competition, both wings of the executive branch disdain the already weak TRIPS system and the innovation–public interest protection balance.

China tends to rely on the notion of 'sovereignty' quite a bit in its interpretations. In NPC meetings and in the 'official' discourse, there tends to be a lot of emphasis on 'law' in the 'needs' of 'development' in a 'law' of its own. 'Policies' such as 'Made in China 2025' and 'High Tech Industry Support' provide the rationale for the use of TRIPS flexibilities, especially Article 8, which deals with the protection of the public interest in certain essential areas. Such a strategy has been dubbed 'selective adaptation', where formal compliance with global obligations is 'nationally' configured.

The NPC plays a key role in the embodiment of the aforementioned constituents into legislation. Intellectual property reform has always had, in addition to international and external factors, factors within China itself. The NPC debate is an illustration of this, much-documented balance of 'in' and 'out'. Consider, for example, the emphasis given to two issues advanced by the 2020 Patent Law amendments by some members of the Standing Committee. It was believed that IP rights, if enforced and controlled as needed, would stimulate local Research and Development and innovation, but would provide an undue advantage to foreign companies competing in China. This delicate balance was also reflected in the implementing legislation, which was strong enough to relieve pressure from other countries, but also flexible enough to maintain policy space for China's own industrial champions.

Legal Reasoning and the Technological State

Intellectual property in China is different from the rest of the world because of its aspirations for technology development. While the rest of the world's intellectual property frameworks developed through case law and market activities, China's is designed to reshape a country's industry. Changes focus with the economic reforms delineated in the Five-Year Plans, the 'Made in China 2025' policy, and the more recent policies aiming for technological autonomy. With the focus on the 13th Five-Year Plan in terms of 'development through innovation' and the 14th Five-Year Plan reiterated, the country has marked industrial and intellectual property as a 'National Strategic Resource' in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and biotechnology.

Chinese legal thinking has been formulated and influenced by the integration of law with industrial policy. Intellectual property as state-driven development is more than an abstract contraction of individual rights. In the 2020 revision of the Patent Law, for instance, the document, in addition to the form compliance, underwent 'reduction to practice' by having priority for autonomy-driven pharmaceuticals and microchips.

The world has entered a new age with the development of artificial intelligence. While many nations have been hesitant to provide intellectual property rights for AI-generated works, Chinese institutions have adopted a different stance. The Beijing Internet Court granted copyright in 2023 for a work in which automation played a significant role, as long as a threshold of human creativity could be determined. Despite the lack of doctrinal discussion, this shows a flexible and pragmatic strategy that emphasises the quick adoption of technology. The legal reasoning that suggests otherwise revolves around the intense focus of both the US and China on semiconductors, which has become a key strategic element. On a global scale, China has been pushing for "fair access" to technology mapping from abroad, while simultaneously opposing the American restrictions on advanced chipmaking technology. Within its own borders, China has sped up the patent

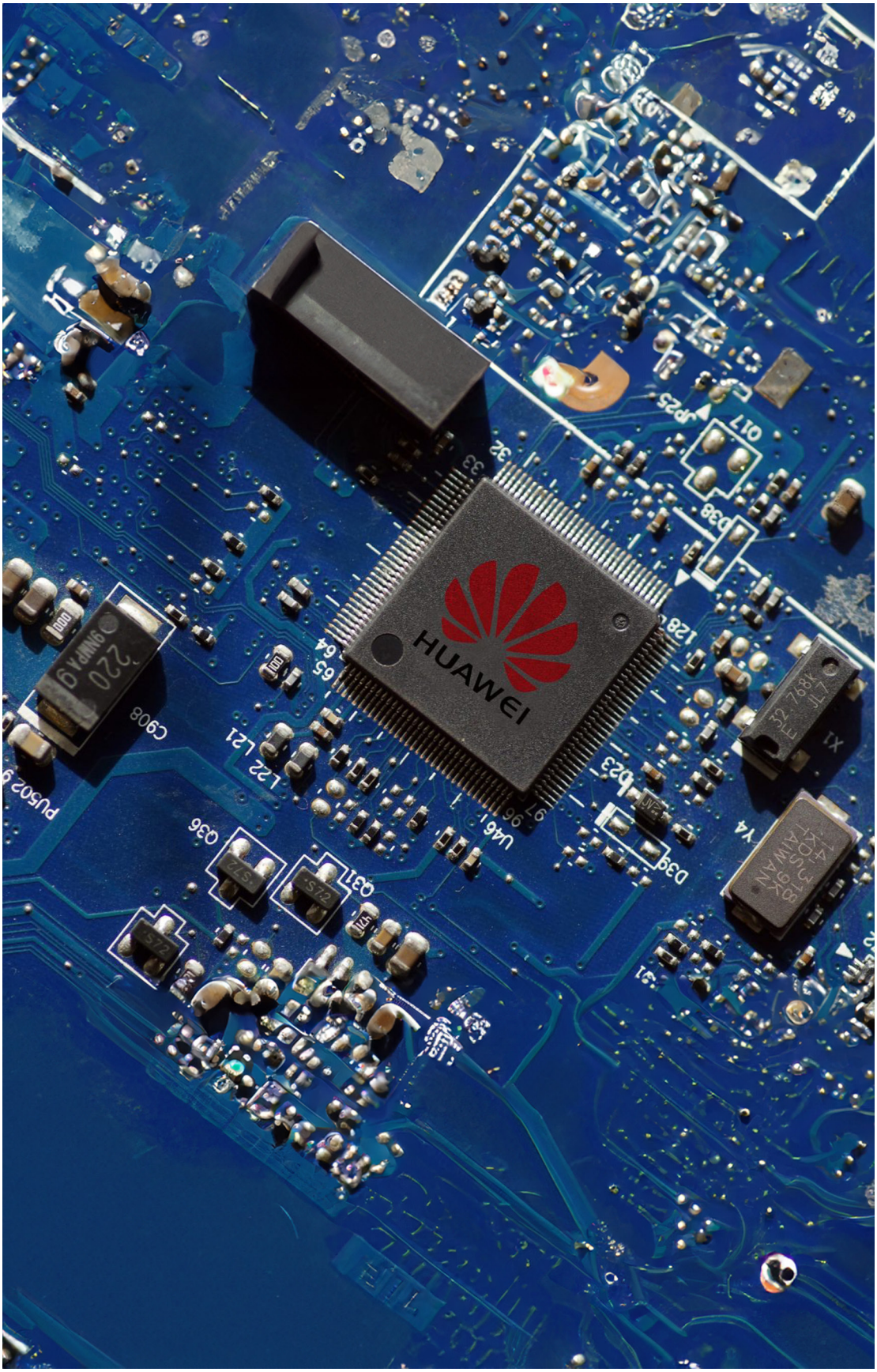
application process for semiconductor design and manufacturing, thanks to state support. The 2020 amendment to the Patent Law was seen as a way to create certain patent linkages in pharmaceuticals, but it also aimed to boost domestic innovation in the semiconductor sector.

Among the most transparent cases is in standard-essential patents (SEPs) disputes, particularly in telecommunications. In Huawei v. InterDigital (2013), although the Shenzhen Intermediate People's Court not only decided on royalty rates in line with the fair, reasonable, and non-discriminatory (FRAND) standard but also banned InterDigital from pursuing injunctions overseas, the rationale was concerning avoiding "abuse of dominance" and ensuring Chinese firms were able to access foreign technology on an equal basis. Such a ruling was a manifestation of a double logic: compliance with international antitrust norms on the one hand and safeguarding local companies in global markets on the other.

Conclusion: China's Legal-Techno Future

China's innovation and intellectual property history over the past forty years has been one of remarkable transformation and defies simple categorisation. China, which in the late 1970s lacked a modern intellectual property system, has since developed one that rivals and even outperforms established nations in certain areas. There have been periods of reactive legislation in response to international pressure, accommodating reforms to meet the requirements of a new generation of WTO membership, and since then, a few instances of deliberate recalibration aimed at using intellectual property to further industrial policy and geopolitical standing. The journey has not been a straight line.

Finally, Western assumptions regarding intellectual property as an impartial framework of private rights are called into doubt by the Chinese approach. Beijing's legal system is tightly linked to its strategy, which serves as a weapon for geopolitical talks, an aid to industrial policy, and a system of internal governance. The question that needs to be asked by scholars, businesses, and politicians is not whether China will "catch up" to international standards, but rather how it will modify them to fit its own goals. Beijing's creation of an intellectual property system based on pragmatism, industrial drive, and governmental control shows that future innovation regulations will be made in Beijing just as much as in Geneva, Washington, or Brussels.■


HUAWEI

China's Centralised Frontier and America's Retreat: The Global Contest for Research & Development Leadership

ABHILASHA SEMWAL & NEETI GOUTAM

China's Science and Technology (S&T) ecosystem has undergone sweeping changes in recent years. It also raises one critical question: despite the United States cutting federal research funding underpinning S&T, how has China continued to expand its research and development ecosystem? One answer to this lies in China's intent of centralised administrative control, and its organised research. "New Quality Productive Forces", a concept proposed by Xi Jinping himself in the year 2023, is seen as a national strategy to uplift industrial modernisation through science, research and technological innovation.

This approach of China is now shifting the global balance of research power and positioning China as a powerful competitor to the United States in various fields ranging from artificial intelligence (AI), renewable energy, biomedicine and other sciences. With the establishment of the Central Science and Technology Commission (CSTC), China aims to coordinate the nation's entire science and technology agenda and also to oversee agencies like the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC), aligning with national goals. Even the Ministry of Education (MOE) integrates the Chinese Communist Party to link academia with the national missions.

The Scale of China's Research and Development Surge

Data shows that between 2012 and 2023, China's gross domestic expenditure on research and development rose by 224% – almost double the United States' increase of 120%. The National Bureau of Statistics reports R&D funding exceeded 3.6 trillion yuan (£496 billion) in 2024, a significant 8.3% increase compared to 2023.

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This surge is due to many factors: policy interventions supporting R&D innovation, diversified investment, and the increased role of enterprises contributing well to this surge. One of China's key focuses is intramural R&D – research conducted in government labs under direct state control. This is unlike the United States, where most research funding is channelled through universities and the private sector. China's reliance on the intramural ecosystem fosters self-reliance and reinforces the civil–military integration of technologies, keeping commercial and defence innovation both at par.

According to a recent study, China is now home to high-level science and technology experts. Between 2020 and 2024 the number of leading scientists in China increased from 18,805 to 32,511, raising its percentage from 17% to 28%. On the other hand, the United States saw a drop from more than 36,599 to 31,781 in 2024. Researchers in such high numbers publishing influential papers in leading international journals reflect Chinese strength in not just quantitative but qualitative terms.

China's growing global research output in indexed journals is also rising sharply. According to data from the Nature Index 2024, 7 out of the 10 top institutions for contributions are based in China, publishing in high-quality natural and health science journals. China is also the leading country for research output in chemistry, earth, environmental and health sciences.

Another factor is organised scientific research and the mobilisation of resources within China. The programme launched by the Ministry of Education (MOE) called "Organised Research" in 2022 is an important feature of scientific research funding, aligning China's universities with national strategic priorities. This approach focuses on cross-institutional collaboration, technological self-reliance, resource mobilisation, directing funds, and infrastructure development.

To scale academic research in areas such as quantum, artificial intelligence, and brain science, China has operated over 300 State Key Laboratories (SKLs) since 2022 with centralised funding and clear mandates.

Despite global geopolitical tensions, and tech rivalry especially between the US and China, and despite US efforts at decoupling, China keeps an open eye to international collaboration through strict supervision and alignment with national interests. Many researchers working abroad also play key roles in China's government labs. However, this centralised system has its own challenges. While big projects receive huge funding, individual researchers face tighter competition for resources. The National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC), one of the biggest funders of basic research, under MOST, has seen a huge surge in applications, far above the increase in spending. For example, in 2024 the total funds for NSFC increased by 6.3% compared to 2023, but applications rose by 26.36%. NSFC is therefore looking for more joint funding with government and enterprises.

Another challenge is connecting academic innovation to the market. While Chinese universities lead the world in patent filings, fewer than 5% of academic patents are commercialised compared to 54% in the United States. To improve this, China is investing more in start-ups, technology transfer, and improving hiring quality. Another problem is fragmentation of work and funding. Some programmes, such as those on carbon neutrality, require collaboration between departments, but government funding often flows to conventional academic departments. To move further, overemphasis on government-preferred priorities sometimes comes at the expense of grassroots innovation.

Innovation at a Crossroad: America's Retreat and the Rise of the Global South

While China's centralised surge transforms its R&D ecosystem, the US is witnessing the opposite trend. On a dreary February morning in Washington, scientists gathered in labs and institutions to absorb the startling news that the federal budget for 2026 proposed a 40% cut to NIH and a 57% cut to NSF. For many, it felt like watching the earth crumble under years of diligent work.

This was not how the tale of American science was meant to unfold. The United States once supported the biotech and computer revolutions, sent men to the moon, and spent about 2% of its GDP on research. Government investment in R&D is now at a 70-year low of 0.6% of GDP, and that foundation is in danger.

For a long time, economists have argued that research and development is an investment rather than a cost. Jones and Summers (2020) argue there is around £5 in long-term GDP for every £1 invested in research. The most recent data from Fieldhouse & Mertens (2025) strengthens the argument even more: shocks to government R&D investment have a direct causal impact on productivity growth and produce gross social returns ranging from 150% to 300%.

These returns are not abstract; they are responsible for the mRNA vaccine, GPS, and the internet. However, the benefits are not obvious in short-term budget debates since they are unpredictable and long-term.

Twenty to twenty-five per cent of the rise in private-sector productivity after World War II came from federal R&D (Jaffe & Jones, 2015). This is supported by econometric data from Fieldhouse & Mertens (2025), who show that a slowdown in public R&D considerably reduces productivity growth. Put another way, federal grants and labs are more than just funding documents; they subtly drive improvements in company efficiency across the economy.

However, these spillovers have decreased since the 1970s as US support has stalled. The decline in national productivity is a result of both automation and globalisation, as well as withdrawal from the very investments that spark innovation.

This re-alignment is occurring in the Global South as Washington retreats. Researchers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are forming south–south alliances, chasing different funding streams, and demanding to dictate research agendas, as noted by Sindi (2025) in The Great Funding Shift. Ironically, while historically under-resourced systems are experimenting with resilience, the world's richest nation is retreating. These nations can seize the chance to shape global research in their own ways if the United States fails.

American lay-offs carry significant risks. Advanced biology, AI, and quantum computing are not ancillary topics; they are the economic battlegrounds of the twenty-first century. Applications may be built by private firms, but the underlying, speculative science is only supported by public funding. According to Fieldhouse & Mertens (2025), cuts risk destroying the spillover structure that supports sustained production. On the other hand, rivals are moving forward: since 2000, China's R&D share of GDP has quadrupled, while the EU is still expanding (OECD, 2023).

If the evidence is so compelling, why cut? The explanation is politics. Anecdotes—fruit fly experiments that seem absurd, or discoveries dismissed as frivolous—are used to evaluate research. However, history suggests the two are connected: revolutionary innovations are usually sown by unannounced initiatives. Science's greatest strength is its unpredictability.

Its advancements are due to ambiguity, not despite it. Reducing funding because impacts are incalculable is a miscalculation of what makes discovery so powerful.

Those who were formerly on the periphery are trying to seize the lead, while a nation built on invention is disinvesting. The differences are striking. Although under threat, America's golden goose is still alive. Meanwhile, the Global South is subtly crafting its own story of resilience.

Conclusion

Thus, to strengthen the innovation ecosystem in China would mean better recognition of individual contributions within the larger framework, more incentives for interdisciplinary collaboration, and learning from the UK model of the Research Excellence Framework, which considers research impact on society rather than simply counting publications. For many years, China focused on becoming the manufacturing hub for its economic growth. Now, however, it has shifted to innovation, technology and research-driven development. Indeed, China's R&D expansion—the backbone of innovation—is reshaping global innovation through centralised coordination, rising investment in projects, growing talent, and industry collaboration. Yet it is equally important to balance political vision with academic creativity and grassroots research.

At the same time, America faces the danger of undermining the very system that built its global leadership in science and technology. The golden goose of US innovation is at risk, even as China and the Global South push ahead. Whether science will shape the future is no longer a question. It will. Who will drive it, who will pay for it, and who will gain from it are the real questions. ■


中国电信
CHINA TELECOM

China in the Global Innovation Index (2016–2025): A Decade of Transformation

SHIVANI SINGH

World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) has released its latest edition of Global Innovation Index (GII). China has entered the top 10 in innovation for the first time by ranking 10th globally, positioning China as the only middle-income economy within the top 30. Over the past decade, China's rise in has been steady, systematic, and tied closely to reforms in its intellectual property system. Moving from the 25th position in 2016 to finally breaking into the global top ten in 2025, China has reshaped its profile from an emerging innovator to a global innovation leader. The numbers tell one story, but behind them lies a deeper context: sustained investment in research and development (R&D), the strengthening of intellectual property (IP) law, the rapid growth of patenting capacity, and the creation of a domestic environment where innovation is both incentivised and protected. (WIPO, 2025)

China's rise is particularly striking compared to peers. High-income economies like South Korea and Singapore have long ranked in the top 10, but they started from a stronger institutional base. China, as a middle-income economy, is unique in making its rapid entry to the top tier. Throughout 2016-2025, it has been the only middle-income country among the top 30, underscoring the distinctiveness of its trajectory. (WIPO, 2025)

China's rank of 25th in 2016 placed it ahead of most middle-income economies, but far behind global leaders. By 2018, it had broken into the top 20 (17th), a symbolic milestone that drew international attention. The climb continued, 14th in 2019 and 2020, 12th in 2021, 11th in 2022, and although it slipped briefly to 12th in 2023, it regained momentum in 2024 at 11th. Finally, in 2025, China entered the top 10 for the first time. Its GII score rose too, from about 50.6 in 2016 to over 56 by 2025. Unlike more volatile economies, China's rise was gradual, a sign of structural changes rather than temporary boosts. (WIPO, 2025)

Outputs Outpacing Inputs

One consistent pattern is the imbalance between China's innovation inputs and outputs. On the Input Sub-Index, which measures institutions, human capital, infrastructure, and market sophistication, China has performed respectably but not at the level of the very top economies. On the Output Sub- Index, however, China consistently overperforms, often ranking in the top five globally.

That gap is explained by how efficiently China converts resources into measurable results: patents, publications, high-tech exports, and creative goods. Patent numbers tell the story best. In 2023, China granted a record 921,000 invention patents, alongside 2.09 million utility model patents and 638,000 design patents. By the end of that year, it became the first country in the world to surpass 4 million valid invention patents (CNIPA, 2024). CNIPA, its patent office, granted nearly three times as many patents as the USPTO. Globally, innovators residing in China filed about 1.64 million patent applications in 2023, of which over 120,000 were filed abroad. (WIPO 2024)

The examination system has been streamlined to keep pace. The average review time for invention patents has dropped to about 15.5 months, making China one of the fastest jurisdictions worldwide. To handle rising volumes, CNIPA has expanded its examiner base to more than 16,000 and set up seven regional offices (CNIPA, 2024). Specialised centers now process AI-related pre-examination requests, handling 46,000 such requests in 2023 alone. Around 31,000 AI patents were granted via fast-track review, directly feeding the growth of China's AI industry. (CNIPA, 2025)

Innovation Clusters and Regional Hubs

The GII also measures science and technology clusters. Here, China is unrivalled. In 2025, it had 24 clusters in the world's top 100, down slightly from 26, but still more than any other country. Shenzhen–Hong Kong–Guangzhou topped the global ranking, overtaking Tokyo–Yokohama. The cluster alone accounted for nearly 10 percent of global PCT filings between 2020 and 2024, led by Huawei and anchored by research institutions like Sun Yat Sen University. (WIPO, 2025)

Other leading hubs, Beijing, Shanghai–Suzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, combine the weight of universities, companies, and local governments. Some, like Ningde (driven by CATL's dominance in battery technology), now feature in the top 100 for the first time. Together, these hubs highlight how China's innovation is geographically concentrated, but globally competitive in scale and intensity. (WIPO, 2025)

Green Technology and Global Leadership

China's top ranking is not only about numbers, but also about direction. Green technology is a clear example. By 2024, China had filed 6,356 PCT applications in green and low-carbon technologies, 2.3 times more than in 2020, cementing its lead for the fourth consecutive year. It is also the largest contributor to WIPO GREEN, with over 12,000 technology solutions shared. (CNIPA, 2025)

The broader context is China's role as both the largest emitter of greenhouse gases and the largest investor in renewable energy. In 2022, it invested USD 546 billion, almost half of global renewable investment (World Economic Forum, 2023). It dominates solar panel manufacturing (80% of global capacity), has the world's largest wind and hydropower markets, and controls three-quarters of global lithium-ion battery production. This alignment of industrial policy, IP filings, and climate goals underscores how China is shaping the future of both green industries and IP-driven growth.

Challenges on the Input Side

Still, China's weaknesses remain. It underperforms in institutions, financial market depth, and regulatory quality. Despite major campaigns, counterfeit goods and enforcement gaps persist, and allegations of IP theft continue to shape international perceptions. The emphasis on resident filings, over 90 percent of CNIPA applications, shows how domestic activity drives the numbers. This imbalance between domestic and international reach highlights the next challenge: converting quantitative dominance into qualitative influence abroad. (WIPO, 2025)

Entering the Top 10

Breaking into the top 10 in 2025 signals not only recognition but a new phase of competition. For China, it validates decades of policy linking growth with innovation-driven development. For the global system, it marks the center of innovation gravity shifting decisively toward Asia. China's rise in renewable energy patents, AI filings, and ICT technologies shows that it is no longer just catching up, it is increasingly shaping the frontier.

Conclusion

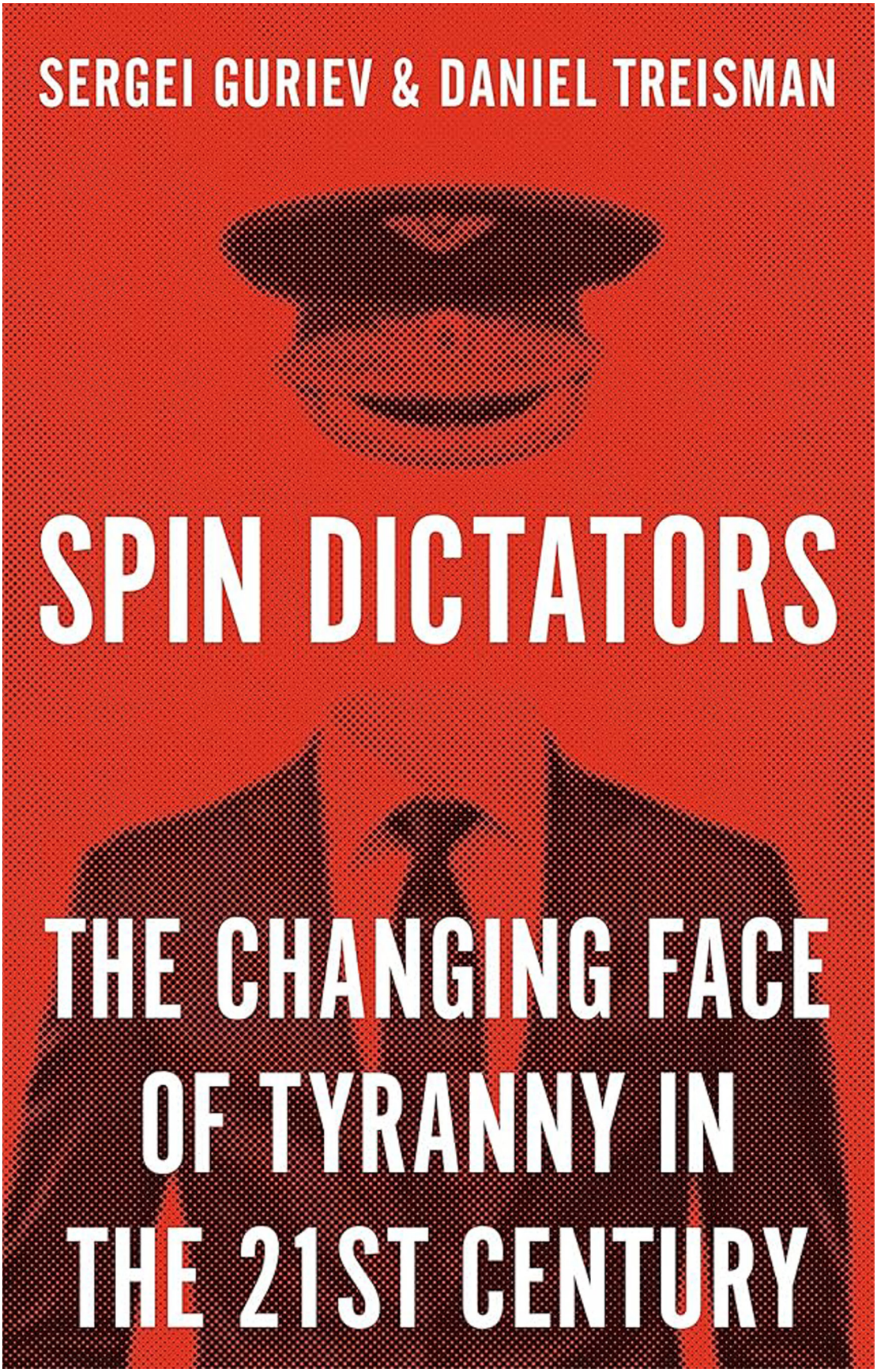
Forty years ago, patents were seen in China as incompatible with socialist ideals. The 1984 Patent Law was a tentative experiment, revised in 1992 and 2000 to meet WTO requirements. The turning point came in 2008, when the law was revised not just for compliance but to serve national development. In 2020, punitive damages and higher compensation limits transformed enforcement. By the mid- 2020s, specialised IP courts and rapid pre-examination centers had turned China into one of the fastest, most prolific IP offices in the world (China Briefing, 2024)

From hesitant beginnings in the 1980s to more than 5 million patents in force by 2023, China's trajectory shows how law, policy, and R&D investment can combine to remake a global innovation profile. Entering the top 10 of the GII is not the end point, but one more milestone in China's emergence as a central actor shaping the future of global innovation. ■

Top 10 Countries in Global Innovation Index (GII), 2025

		Indicators Rank						
		Institutions	Human capital and research	Infrastructure	Market sophistication	Business sophistication	Knowledge and technology outputs	Creative outputs
1	Switzerland	3	6	5	3	5	2	1
2	Sweden	12	3	4	9	2	4	2
3	United States	16	13	32	1	1	3	5
4	South Korea	20	1	7	5	4	9	4
5	Singapore	1	2	19	6	3	7	15
6	United Kingdom	25	7	23	4	17	5	3
7	Finland	5	5	3	11	12	8	16
8	Netherlands	11	14	30	12	7	10	6
9	Denmark	2	11	8	16	11	13	9
10	China	44	20	6	13	8	1	14

Source: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)


SERGEI GURIEV & DANIEL TREISMAN
SPIN DICTATORS
THE CHANGING FACE OF TYRANNY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century

A CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL TREISMAN

Amogh Rai

A lot of people have read this book. Over the past year it has been a topic of constant conversation, both serious and superficial, across the world. But there are many who have not read it. I hate to do this to the author, since it is the result of multiple research papers, but for those who have not: in five to seven minutes, what is the CliffsNotes version, the long summary?

Daniel Treisman

The book grew out of conversations I had with my co-author about how the regime in Russia was evolving in the 2000s and 2010s. We saw a kind of authoritarianism emerging that looked different from the stereotypical regimes of the twentieth century.

Back then, dictators tended to be very violent. They imprisoned large numbers of opponents, often killed dissidents, and relied on fear as their main strategy of control. But in the early Putin years – not the later ones – we saw something else. His system was clearly not democratic, but it was different from Stalin, Mao, Pinochet, the Argentine junta, or African rulers like Mobutu. It seemed like a new kind of dictatorship, and as we looked around the world, we found parallels. Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary – all were maintaining control while keeping the appearance of democratic institutions.

In practice, they stripped democracy of almost everything. We began to ask how to define and measure this model. A few elements stood out. Instead of spreading fear, these leaders aimed to secure genuine public support, but they did so by manipulating information. They censored covertly and controlled media. Often they left a small independent outlet alive, just to preserve the appearance of democracy, but it had little reach.

They avoided mass imprisonment, since that would make their authoritarianism too obvious. Elections were held, but quietly manipulated – rigged if necessary, or simply smoothed to guarantee results. They avoided heavy ideology. Unlike the twentieth

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century's official dogmas, their main appeal was usually nationalism, presented in a way that still looked compatible with democracy.

The central goal was to maintain high approval ratings. Their rule was justified as popular, but this popularity was artificial: real opponents were excluded from the media, barred from ballots, or neutralised by regulations.

We saw this model in many places. We labelled it a "spin dictatorship" or "informational autocracy," and contrasted it with the "fear dictatorships" of the twentieth century. Collecting data, we found that spin dictatorships had grown dramatically. Between 1970 and 2010, they rose from about 10 percent of non-democratic regimes to more than 50 percent. That is the book's basic point.

We then asked why this shift had happened. And we also stressed that spin dictatorships do not always remain so. Some evolve. Putin is a case in point: he began as a spin dictator, converting democratic institutions into a pseudo-democracy. But over time, especially with the war in Ukraine, he reverted towards open repression. Russia today is again more like a classic fear dictatorship, openly intimidating any opposition.

Daniel Treisman

In Russia today, opposition has been forced out of the country or jailed on pretexts. The small independent media outlets that once existed have been shut down, so any free press now operates from abroad. The rhetoric has also shifted. Early on, the government tried to present itself as competent, professional, and caring. Now the emphasis is on external threats, the dangers facing Russia, the need for loyalty, and portraying critics as traitors.

We have seen similar changes elsewhere. In Venezuela, Maduro relies much more on overt violence and fear than Chávez did. Still, many regimes remain closer to the spin dictator model, and some new ones have appeared since we wrote the book. In Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić has created what looks like a spin dictatorship, although it is unclear whether it will prove stable. It may still be replaced through democratic means.

So, to summarise, we argue that there has been a trend towards manipulative, deceptive, less violent regimes that pretend to be democratic, replacing the earlier violent, ideological, and often totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century.

Amogh Rai

Thank you. For everyone listening, the book goes much deeper, with anecdotes, data, and visuals, so please do read it. Professor Treisman, one case study that immediately stands out is Lee Kuan Yew. You use him as a starting point and then show how others have followed his model. But should we call the Lee Kuan Yew system a spin dictatorship, or is it a quasi-democracy?

Daniel Treisman

I am not sure what quasi-democracy means. At some point, if a system does not allow genuine turnover in government, it cannot be called a democracy. I do consider Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew to be the original modern example of informational autocracy, and the most successful one. Many authoritarian leaders have tried to imitate it.

Amogh Rai

But not quite perfected it?

Daniel Treisman

Exactly. The People's Action Party (PAP) has won election after election, usually with around 90 percent of parliamentary seats. Its share of the vote has been lower, but the electoral system translates this into

overwhelming dominance.

There are mechanisms that prevent real opposition from posing a threat. The media is tightly controlled through boards aligned with the government. On the surface, citizens can speak freely and run for office. In practice, however, critics face serious consequences. Defamation suits are used with devastating effect, imposing extreme financial penalties. Some opponents have been bankrupted and therefore barred from standing in elections.

So, a whole set of techniques pioneered in Singapore have later been adopted by other authoritarian rulers. The reason I would not call it a democracy is that it is very hard to imagine any party seriously challenging PAP control at the ballot box, at least up to now.

Amogh Rai

That is exactly the answer I was looking for. When I researched outside the book, I noticed that Lee Kuan Yew constantly referred to democracy, redefining it to fit his context. Putin, Orban, and others have used similar strategies, though without reaching the same level of refinement.

Looking at the examples in your book – from Peru to Berlusconi's Italy – what unites them is a reinterpretation of history. And you and your co-author argue that with more university graduates, spin dictators face a crossroads: either move towards democracy or revert to the old model of fear. For many, whether in Singapore or Russia beyond Moscow, this tension remains unresolved.

Amogh Rai

This long-winded theory of history seems to give spin dictators a sense of their place in the world. How do you see their interpretation of democracy and history in light of your research?

Daniel Treisman

That is an interesting question. Many authoritarian leaders justify themselves through distorted versions of history. Democratic politicians also idealise the past, especially when their party was in power, but authoritarian leaders take this much further. They can silence critics who challenge their version of events.

Is this different from the way fear dictators of the twentieth century used history? I think so. Under Stalin, Khrushchev, or Hitler, history was tied to an official ideology. Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union, or Mein Kampf in Nazi Germany, shaped how history was presented. It was not simply a flattering narrative but part of a broader doctrine imposed on citizens.

Spin dictators, at least in their early phases, tend to offer histories not far from what nationalist democratic politicians might say. Putin in his early years talked about Russia rejoining Europe and taking its place among modern powers. Later, especially since the war in Ukraine, he has become obsessed with minute historical details, going back to the Middle Ages, which marks a sharp turn back towards an older model of rule.

Other spin dictators use history too. Erdogan appeals to Turkey's Ottoman past. In Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew and his successors emphasised Singapore's unique development path, external threats, and cultural arguments about Asian values being distinct from Western ones. This became a justification for their particular version of democracy, though I am not sure it represents a radically different conception of history compared to mainstream accounts.

Amogh Rai

Let me give an example. I watched Tucker Carlson's interview with Putin. It was a nightmarish display of distorted history.

Most of the facts were wrong, yet because it was presented as a great revelation, it was hard to ignore. Viktor Orban did something similar in his interview with Carlson in Budapest.

Hungary is an interesting case. As you note in the book, spin dictators often join multilateral organisations. They gain access to democratic institutions and tools, which they then manipulate. Hungary is a member of the EU, but also of the Organization of Turkic States, even though the theory that Hungarians descended from Turks has long been discredited.

Yet Orban embraces this narrative. He funds think tanks, promotes reports, and pushes this view until it becomes part of public discourse. This is striking because we live in an age of spin, where many will read a flashy report rather than a 300-page scholarly book. Leaders like Orban exploit that by rewriting history in ways that support their political strategies.

Amogh Rai

Could you give me a short version? I'm more familiar with democracies, so that was my intent. How do you challenge this?

Daniel Treisman

Spin dictators certainly use history. They distort rather than completely invent facts, and they present them in a somewhat deceptive way. They are also less concerned with consistency.

Take Putin's early rhetoric. It was a kaleidoscope of historical references, often contradictory, designed to appeal to different audiences. He drew on Soviet nostalgia, pre-Soviet imperial grandeur, and modern post-Soviet narratives. This artistic reassembly of fragments created a mosaic that resonated with people from very different backgrounds. That is quite characteristic of spin dictators, and distinct from fear dictators, who, when tied to an ideology, tried to keep it more internally consistent and grounded in key texts.

Amogh Rai

Yes, and to add to that—this comes from the book—you describe the term "tsar" being applied to Putin. It reimagines a glorious era, casting Russia as a great power once more. Today, Russia is a fraction of the United States' economy, but it still sustains an empire of influence with Putin at its centre.

Similarly, in Turkey, Erdogan is often referred to as "the publisher" in Turkic newspapers, which harks back to an older imperial identity. These uses of language deliberately recall past glory. But here's my question: with ideology. Would you say we are now past the age of ideology in the sense of violent dictatorships, and that spin dictators instead use religion as a substitute?

If you look at Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church, Erdogan and political Islam, or Mohammed bin Salman, you can see different versions of religion being mobilised as tools of control. So, is religion now an important feature of spin dictatorships?

Daniel Treisman

I would not say it is characteristic. Spin dictatorships vary enormously. Politically, some are on the right—early Putin, or Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew—others on the left, such as Hugo Chávez. It is the same with religion. Some leaders, like those you mentioned, draw on it heavily. Others—Fujimori in Peru, or Singapore's leaders—did not emphasise religion at all.

Religion is used opportunistically, depending on the context. If a ruler governs a religiously homogeneous society, religion is a more powerful tool. In a multi-religious society, it is harder to exploit

without alienating groups. Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, for example, used different rhetoric when addressing Russian-speaking citizens compared to Muslim Kazakhs. This kind of inconsistency is very typical.

As for history, dictators in general emphasise the past more than democratic leaders, who usually focus on the present and future. Spin dictators mimic democrats rhetorically, so some do talk about the future as well. But the reliance on selective versions of the past remains common.

Amogh Rai

That's helpful. One of the interesting features of your book is a graph showing the emergence of spin dictatorships around the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of the neoliberal consensus.

Amogh Rai

Speaking now as an economist, this period coincides with the Washington Consensus. We saw second and third generation reforms in different regions, and at the same time, spin dictatorships seemed to mature. Before that, there were only a few. Did the neoliberal consensus make resource control easier and allow spin dictatorships to boom? Take Russia, for instance.

Yeltsin's tragedy was selling nickel and petroleum companies for almost nothing. Then came Putin, who famously told the oligarchs to leave politics if they wanted to keep their companies. Figures like Berezovsky were sidelined. Did neoliberal reforms help spin dictatorships consolidate power?

Daniel Treisman

We see the rise of spin dictatorships as linked to economic modernisation. The relationship between the Washington Consensus and the rapid economic growth of the late 20th century can be debated, but what matters is the broader global change. Many countries experienced dramatic increases in wealth, though also rising inequality.

What was most relevant to spin dictatorships? First, the growth of the middle class. Second, the shift from industry to a knowledge economy. Heavy-handed repression was no longer sustainable, as innovation required the free flow of ideas. Third, media diversification meant information could not be monopolised as easily.

Added to this was the spread of democratic ideals. Middle classes wanted representation, at least to some degree. Globalisation further complicated outright repression. Dictators had incentives to be more inventive, to mimic democracy, and to exploit its advantages. This gave them domestic legitimacy and international benefits, such as foreign investment and better relations with Western governments.

So economic development, globalisation, and the paradigm shifts of the 1980s and 1990s laid the groundwork for a new model of dictatorship. It was less about neoliberal ideas themselves and more about vast global economic and social changes that made the spin dictatorship viable.

Amogh Rai

One striking characterisation in your book is of spin dictators in sharp suits at Davos and the World Economic Forum. What troubles me is the role played by global consultancies. Many worked closely with Russia. When I looked back at publications from the big four or McKinsey, they painted a glowing picture of Russia's transformation.

Between 2001 and 2006, Putin could do no wrong in their eyes. He was hailed as a transformative leader. Yet on the ground,

alcoholism was rampant, and young male mortality was shockingly high. Control over people's lives was slipping, but international consultancies and rating agencies created a halo around Putin. How responsible are such firms for giving wannabe dictators a platform?

Daniel Treisman

The answer is complex. On Russia, the sharp rise in alcoholism and mortality actually occurred in the 1990s under Yeltsin, not under Putin. These problems did persist into the early 2000s, but from around 2002 they declined sharply. Social reforms and changes under Putin helped reduce mortality and alcoholism. As the middle class grew, people substituted away from dangerous hard liquor, which contributed to the improvement.

Daniel Treisman

Binge drinking shifted towards beer and wine in the early 2000s, and health outcomes stabilised compared to the crisis of the 1990s. That was one part of the picture.

Why did consultancies and international opinion give Putin a break in the early 2000s? The economy was booming. The stock market surged, oil prices rose, and billionaires multiplied during Putin's early years. To many, Russia looked as if it were on a positive path. It is understandable that consultancies focused on those numbers.

I too may have underestimated the dangers. I was aware of them, but not their future impact. Still, Putin's path was not predetermined. In 2000–01, he appeared open to closer cooperation with the West. Based on his private conversations with people I have spoken to, he genuinely considered it. The Putin of 2000 looked quite different from the Putin of 2008, let alone today.

The security services became increasingly dominant, but at first their influence was less visible. We still do not fully know how or why Putin's regime hardened. In the early years, it could have developed differently. It might have remained a spin dictatorship rather than reverting to fear. It might even have evolved into something more competitive or democratic, particularly if Putin had stepped down.

There seemed a moment in 2008, when he handed power to Dmitry Medvedev, that he could have felt safe enough to retreat. He chose otherwise. That choice was not inevitable, though in retrospect it seems so. Consultancies were not completely wrong; they simply overemphasised positive economic numbers, which shaped their optimistic assessments.

Amogh Rai

I agree with your points. You are the Russia expert, and I accept your timeline of events. My own focus is China, which is fascinating because it straddles both categories: spin dictatorship and fear dictatorship. It manages to be in both camps simultaneously.

It was not always so. In the early 1990s, many assumed China was on a path to democracy. In 1996 or 1997, Bill Gates predicted that new technology would undermine the Communist Party's control. Two and a half decades later, that has proven entirely wrong.

To borrow from historian Stephen Kotkin, when researchers entered the Soviet archives, they discovered the USSR was indeed a communist country. Similarly, when consultancies spoke about China, they often forgot it was still a communist regime. Today, nobody seriously considers China a democratic hope.

But let us take Vietnam. Where would you place Vietnam on your spectrum of spin versus fear, especially now that the president has just resigned under mysterious

circumstances?

Daniel Treisman

There is no guarantee that the world will remain as interconnected as it is today, nor that economic development will continue. Growth has persisted for a long time, despite recessions and downturns, but nothing ensures that trend will hold.

Still, if economic and social modernisation continue, it becomes harder to control a country through mass repression. Old authoritarian tools that worked in agricultural or early industrial societies are less effective in a knowledge economy. The pressure, therefore, is towards progress.

But the caveats matter. Modernisation and globalisation could plateau. Many argue we are already in a "democratic recession", with pressures against democracy growing stronger and the number of democracies slightly declining. Trade and globalisation also appear to be stalling. So yes, mine is a very conditional optimism.

Amogh Rai

Thank you. I will take that optimism—it is much needed. This has been eye-opening on many levels. I hope everyone here picks up the book and engages with it further. And I hope you enjoyed this conversation as much as we did.

Daniel Treisman

Thank you very much. It was a great discussion, and I appreciate your interest. ■

The Imaginarium of China

KHUSHI KESARI

Fig 1: Unidentified artist after Song Academy painter. Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Lady Wenji(detail), early 15th century. Chinese, Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Ex coll.: C. C. Wang Family, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.3)

Introduction

The Chinese fascination with a well-told tale is the stuff of legend and a national Myth. It has shaped Chinese relationships with the world and between themselves. Long before the vocabulary of nationalism arrived in East Asia, Chinese rulers, scholars, and commoners alike were already using myths, histories, and popular tales to distinguish "China" from the rest of the world. These narratives established not only who the Chinese were, but also what values they were meant to uphold and how they should respond to outsiders. Heroes from earlier dynasties, mythic ancestors, and even outlaws were suddenly reframed as symbols of resistance, loyalty, and cultural resilience.

Tracing the evolution of storytelling in relation to Chinese nationalism allows us to see continuity where political ruptures might suggest only breaks. The dynasties changed, the medium shifted, from oral traditions to printed novels, from revolutionary operas to web fiction, but the fundamental practice remained the same. The story of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) unifying the tribes in 221 BC became the foundation of a collective ancestry. The loyalty of Yue Fei in the Song dynasty was revived as an example

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of patriotic resistance against foreign invasion. The tragic follies of Lu Xun's "Ah Q" symbolised the urgency of shaking off spiritual weakness in the early twentieth century. Maoist propaganda tales presented the heroic sacrifice of ordinary peasants and soldiers as the embodiment of national strength. In the twenty-first century, patriotic blockbusters like Wolf Warrior or The Battle at Lake Changjin continue the pattern, dramatising China's humiliations and triumphs for domestic audiences.

This long trajectory is not accidental. As Brett Hinsch has argued, the roots of Chinese nationalism lie much deeper than the conventional account of a nineteenth-century import from the West. The symbolic repertoire for imagining the nation was already present in classical myths, Confucian historiography, and the civilizational worldview that placed China at the centre of "All Under Heaven." When the shocks of imperialism and internal decline hit, these older stories were refashioned into new nationalist narratives. At the same time, as Neil Munro shows through a strategic-culture lens, contemporary Chinese nationalism is structured by historical storytelling that shifts between humiliation and pride, order and freedom, equality and development. In other words, the stories Chinese people tell about their past continue to shape both their national identity and their political imagination today.

This article traces how storytelling has shaped Chinese nationalism and state identity from myth to the digital age. Early creation tales and heroic legends laid the groundwork for collective belonging, while imperial novels and operas reinforced cultural unity. In the late Qing and Republican eras, fiction and essays stirred national consciousness, and under Mao, stories were recast for revolutionary mobilisation. The reform era revived pluralism, drawing on older themes of humiliation and renewal in new literary and cultural forms. Today, storytelling flourishes across science fiction, comics, television dramas, memes, and video games, remaking ancient myths and historical figures for digital audiences and embedding them in China's global ambitions. Across these transformations, storytelling has not simply reflected nationalism but actively produced it, ensuring that the nation is experienced as a shared narrative continually retold across generations.

Myth and the Cultural Origins of Chinese Identity

If one stands in Tiananmen Square today and looks at the murals that flank the entrance to the Forbidden City, images of dragons, phoenixes, and heroic ancestors still hover in the background. These motifs are not arbitrary decoration. They draw on stories that reach back thousands of years, to a time before China was a nation-state, when communities along the Yellow River told tales of creation, cosmic order, and heroic leaders. These myths are not relics of a forgotten age; they continue to function as a catalyst for the Chinese Identity.

The creation story of Pangu is a useful starting point. In the account preserved in Chinese Mythology (1999) and popularised in Chinese Mythology 101 (2021), Pangu was the giant who cleaved heaven from earth and whose body became the natural features of the world. His death was not an end but a transfiguration: his eyes became the sun and moon, his breath the wind, his blood the rivers. Modern scholars such as Lihui Yang emphasise how this myth, while cosmological, also encoded an early vision of unity. The Chinese world is literally imagined as the body of a single progenitor. In contemporary China, this metaphor resonates strongly when textbooks speak of the "body of the nation" or the Communist Party frames itself as the heart sustaining

1.4 billion people; the echoes of Pangu are unmistakable.

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig 2: Portrait of Pangu from Sancai Tuhui, Wikimedia Commons ; Fig 3: Yellow Emperor, as depicted by Gan Bozong, woodcut print, Tang dynasty (618–907), Wikimedia Commons ; Fig 4: Standing Portrait of King Yu of Xia, Portraits from the Nanxun Hall, National Palace Museum. Taipei

If Pangu provided a cosmic backdrop, the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) offered ancestry. Myths collected in Chinese Mythology describe him as the leader who defeated the Yan Emperor at the Battle of Zhuolu, unifying disparate tribes into one polity. He is also credited with inventing writing, medicine, and the compass. Chinese historians stitched myths into history, creating the sense of an unbroken line of rulers stretching back to mythical antiquity. The political potency of this myth endures: as recently as 2009, thousands of Chinese officials and citizens gathered at Huangling in Shaanxi province to honour the Yellow Emperor as the "ancestor of the nation." What began as a tribal legend was thus mobilised into a nationalist ritual.

Equally enduring is the story of Yu the Great, the flood-controlling hero of early China. In Chinese Folktales, Yu's tale is retold with emphasis on his tireless labour: he spent thirteen years diverting rivers and dredging canals, passing by his own home without entering, so devoted was he to the task. His eventual success made him the founder of the Xia dynasty. For ancient audiences, Yu's triumph represented order conquering chaos; for later generations, he came to embody the sacrifice of the leader for the survival of the people. Modern parallels abound. The Communist Party often describes itself as "taming the floods" of poverty, corruption, or foreign aggression. In 1998, when the Yangtze River overflowed and soldiers were photographed forming human chains to block the waters, state media explicitly invoked Yu's myth, reminding citizens that China had always overcome the fury of nature through collective will and heroic leadership.

These myths were not left as folklore; they were canonised. Sima Qian's Shiji transformed oral legends into historiography,

rationalising them into a continuous narrative of Chinese civilisation. Bret Hinsch stresses that this historiographical tradition fostered a sense of collective time, an unbroken line of rulers stretching back to mythical antiquity. This continuity is essential to nationalism. When modern China claims to be a five-thousand-year-old civilisation, it is invoking not just history but also these mythic stories, which were woven into the very fabric of the national past.

The persistence of myth in modern politics suggests that these stories function less as superstition and more as symbols of belonging. Huangdi becomes a shared ancestor in diaspora communities, Yu a model for leaders in times of crisis, and Pangu a metaphor for unity in diversity. Munro reminds us that Chinese identity is often told through narrative tensions, humiliation versus pride, chaos versus order.

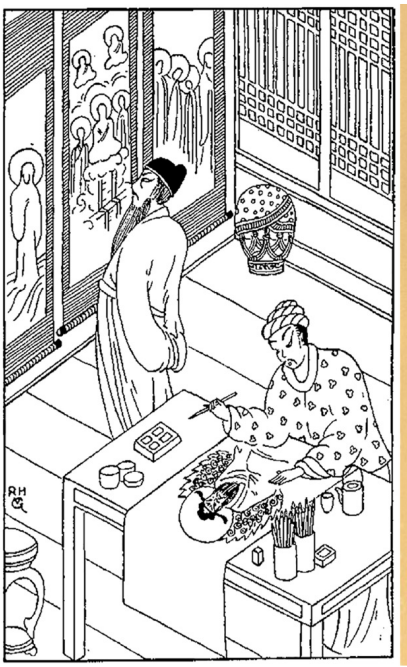


Fig. 5

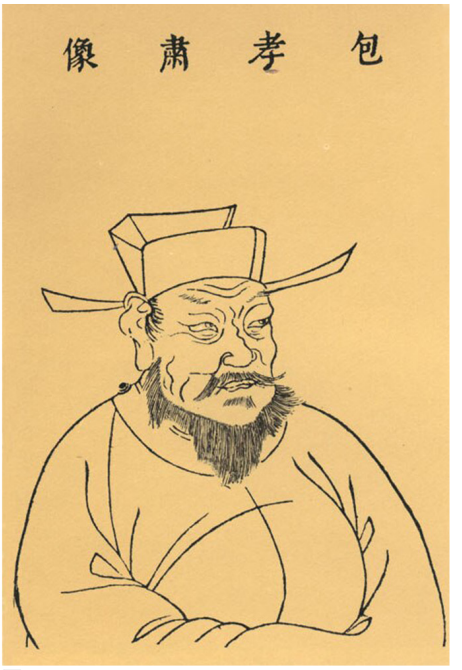


Fig. 6

Fig 5: Judge Dee in Woo Feng's Studio. Note. Reprinted from Van Gulik (1997). Copyright 1957 by N. V. Uitgeverij W. van Hoeve The Hague – Netherlands. ; Fig 6: A portrait of w: Bao Zheng from w: Sancai Tuhui, Wikimedia Commons

If the myths of Pangu, Huangdi, and Yu provided cosmic order and ancestral unity, another enduring strand of Chinese storytelling located legitimacy in the courtroom. Among the most celebrated figures was Bao Zheng (999–1062), a Northern Song magistrate renowned for his incorruptibility. Historical chronicles remember Bao for punishing corrupt officials without fear or favour, and popular culture quickly magnified this reputation. From the Yuan dynasty onward, zaju plays and later Ming–Qing operas depicted Judge Bao as a fearless official exposing treachery at court, often confronting emperors and powerful families alike. Over time, he acquired recognisable visual attributes; his jet-black face and crescent moon forehead mark became shorthand for unbending impartiality on stage. These tales circulated widely in printed collections and performances, serving as moral pedagogy: to dramatise Bao's justice was to remind

audiences that order depended on the courage of officials who placed law above power. In modern times, Judge Bao's persona migrated into novels, films, and television dramas, a continuity that underscores how Chinese audiences continue to prize stories where justice itself becomes a form of cultural inheritance.

If Bao embodied the incorruptible judge, Dee Renjie (c. 630–700) exemplified the detective-magistrate. A Tang official celebrated for his acuity, he was fictionalised centuries later in the gong'an (court-case) genre, where magistrates investigated crimes, interrogated suspects, and restored order through moral judgment. The most influential collection, Dee Goong An (Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee), compiled in the eighteenth century, presents him unravelling complex, interlinked mysteries in ways that upheld both social stability and cosmic balance. These narratives, half-legal case, half-moral allegory, showed readers that good governance was not abstract—it was enacted through stories of investigation and judgment. In the mid-twentieth century, Robert van Gulik, a Dutch diplomat and sinologist, translated Dee Gong An into English and then composed his own Judge Dee novels in the same style, bringing this strand of Chinese storytelling to a global audience. For Chinese readers, Dee remained a moral magistrate; for Western readers, he became a bridge into a different narrative tradition where law and justice were inseparable. Taken together, Judge Bao and Judge Dee illustrate that just as myths of Yu or Huangdi taught unity and sacrifice, judicial tales encoded the equally vital conviction that a legitimate order rested on fairness, probity, and the moral imagination of law.

China's earliest stories laid down the narrative logic that nationalism would later exploit. Creation became unity, ancestry became common blood, flood control became collective salvation, and judicial tales became moral blueprints for just order. When one hears a twenty-first-century slogan like "The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," it is hard not to think of Yu's tireless work, Huangdi's unification, Pangu's sacrifice, or the incorruptible judgments of Bao and Dee. The figures are ancient, but their storytelling power remains alive, shaping how a modern nation imagines itself.

Crisis and Transformation: Late Qing to Republican Era

In the late nineteenth century, bookstalls in Shanghai and Guangzhou were filled with cheap prints, translations of Jules Verne, accounts of foreign wars, and satirical tales of corrupt officials. Storytelling had entered a new age. What once circulated orally in teahouses or on opera stages was now being disseminated through newspapers, journals, and mass-produced fiction. This was not simply a literary shift; it was a political one. As foreign powers carved up China after the Opium Wars and the humiliating defeats of the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), the very survival of the country seemed at stake. Storytelling was pressed into service as an instrument of reform, mobilisation, and awakening.

Liang Qichao is emblematic of this transformation. Exiled to Japan after the failure of the 1898 reforms, he poured his energy into writing political fiction. In essays like The Relationship Between Fiction and the Government of the People (1902), Liang argued that novels could "renew the people of a nation" by shaping morals and civic consciousness. Bret Hinsch notes that for Liang, China's weakness lay not only in its armies but in its imagination. Fiction, he insisted, could cultivate a modern subjectivity, turning passive subjects into active citizens. His own novel, Xin Zhongguo Weilai Ji (The Future of New China), imagined a reformed republic where science, education, and constitutionalism flourished. For the

first time, fiction became a deliberate tool of nation-building.

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig 7: The True Story of Ah Q, Zhao Yannian, Chinese, 1978–80, MET Museum
Fig 8: Qing dynasty illustration of Yue Fei, Wikimedia Commons

But not all storytelling was utopian. Lu Xun, often called the father of modern Chinese literature, wrote short stories that stripped bare what he saw as the spiritual sickness of the nation. In Diary of a Madman, the protagonist sees the words "Eat people!" scrawled between the lines of classical texts, an allegory of the cannibalistic nature of feudal culture. In The True Story of Ah Q, Lu Xun created a character whose self-deceptive optimism masks his humiliation and ultimate execution. As the book A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature observes, Lu Xun's stories were not intended to comfort but to shock readers into awareness. He rejected the consoling loyalty of Yue Fei or the unifying grandeur of the Yellow Emperor. Instead, he showed what happens when a people cannot face reality. His stories became part of the May Fourth Movement's broader call to "destroy the old, build the new."

At the same time, traditional heroes were reinterpreted for nationalist ends. Yue Fei, once celebrated in operas as a dynastic loyalist, reappeared in late Qing plays as a symbol of resistance to foreign aggression. Zhang points out that Yue's story was increasingly framed in racial-nationalist terms, his loyalty representing not just service to the Song dynasty but defence of the Han people against outsiders. Similarly, the ancient myth of the Yellow Emperor was revived in public ceremonies. In 1903, reformers began to promote public sacrifices to Huangdi as "the ancestor of the Chinese nation," a direct attempt to forge ethnic unity.

Print culture also allowed foreign narratives to be appropriated into Chinese contexts. Stories of Western and Japanese

modernisation were translated and circulated in journals like Xin Xiaoshuo (New Fiction). Chengcheng You highlights how these translations did not simply transmit ideas but were reframed through Chinese concerns, emphasising collective regeneration, national dignity, and the urgency of reform. In this way, even borrowed stories were naturalised into the nationalist canon.

The flood of translations in the late Qing was more than a literary curiosity; it became a central mechanism through which Chinese writers reimagined both form and content. Translations of Jules Verne, Dumas, and political novels circulated widely in journals such as Xin Xiaoshuo (New Fiction), where stories of invention, social reform, and national crisis were recast through Chinese concerns. Serialised formats and speculative plots offered narrative tools that were quickly absorbed by domestic writers. By adapting these foreign tales to local contexts, translators created what might be called a new narrative repertoire: stories that could dramatise collective weakness, imagine national renewal, or instruct readers in civic virtue. In this way, translation functioned less as imitation than as cultural circuitry, connecting Chinese audiences to global genres while simultaneously remoulding them for national purposes.

This wave of translation also altered the very expectations of what fiction could do. Where earlier stories of heroes like Yue Fei or Yu the Great reinforced continuity, late Qing translations introduced rupture, urgency, and futurity. Liang Qichao's advocacy of fiction as a tool to "renew the people" was inseparable from the availability of these new forms. Translated detective stories suggested new ways of dramatising justice; political novels imported from Japan supplied models for civic awakening; and speculative romances offered blueprints for scientific modernity. For readers in Shanghai or Guangzhou, encountering these translated texts was not simply to meet Western characters but to see new possibilities for Chinese storytelling itself. By the 1910s and 1920s, the modern Chinese novel had taken shape in part because translation had made it possible to imagine narrative as a vehicle for reform, mobilisation, and nationhood.

The 1920s and 1930s further broadened the field. Storytelling was not confined to elite journals but became a weapon in mass mobilisation. Popular magazines serialised revolutionary tales; films depicted patriotic martyrs; travelling theatre troupes dramatised resistance against warlords and Japanese invaders. Bret Hinsch stresses that nationalism, though a modern political ideology, succeeded in China precisely because it could draw upon older habits of storytelling. The tales of loyal generals, self-sacrificing peasants, and ancestral unity merged with new genres of fiction and reportage to create a nationalist culture that could reach both literate elites and ordinary villagers.

What is striking is the tone of urgency in this period's storytelling. Where myths reassured and dynastic tales reinforced continuity, late Qing and Republican narratives demanded rupture. They spoke in the voice of alarm clocks, warning bells, even sirens. Lu Xun himself compared his work to "iron houses with no windows" that must be smashed open to let in air. The metaphor captures the mood: China was suffocating, and stories were the means to break through.

What is striking is the tone of urgency in this period's storytelling. Where myths reassured and dynastic tales reinforced continuity, late Qing and Republican narratives demanded rupture. They spoke in the voice of alarm clocks, warning bells, even sirens. Translations amplified this atmosphere, bringing in foreign forms such as detective plots, speculative romances, and political novels that sharpened the sense of crisis and possibility. A reader

encountering Jules Verne in Xin Xiaoshuo or Japanese reformist fiction in a Shanghai journal was not merely consuming imported entertainment but absorbing blueprints for renewal or reminders of vulnerability. Lu Xun himself compared his work to "iron houses with no windows" that must be smashed open to let in air, and the metaphor captures the mood: China was suffocating, and stories, whether born of domestic satire or borrowed from abroad, were the means to break through. By the time the Republic descended again into civil war in the 1940s, storytelling had become firmly embedded as a nationalist tool. Writers, playwrights, and filmmakers no longer regarded their work as ornamental but as existential, for the fate of the nation was at stake in every tale. Yet the resources they drew upon were deeply traditional: myths of origin, dynastic heroes, and moral allegories.The crisis of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not erase older stories but reactivated them, reframing ancient motifs in the new vocabulary of nationhood.

Maoist Nationalism and Revolutionary Storytelling (1940s–1976)

If the early twentieth century rang with alarm bells, the mid-century resounded with marching songs. By the 1940s, as the Communist Party consolidated power through war against Japan and civil conflict with the Nationalists, storytelling was no longer simply a tool of critique or reform. It became an apparatus of mobilisation. The Party understood that to build a new China, it needed not only guns and land reform but also myths, heroes who embodied the revolution, narratives that linked ancient virtue with socialist destiny, and stories that ordinary peasants could recognise as their own.

Fig. 8

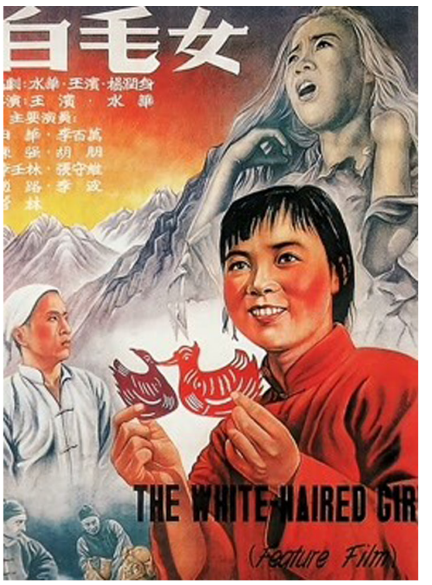


Fig. 9

Fig 9: Red Detachment Of Women by Orchestra Of The China Ballet Troupe, 1971, Internet Archive ; Fig 10: The White-haired Girl, iQIYI

A striking example is the creation of the "Red Classics", a canon of revolutionary tales disseminated through novels,

operas, and films. Works like The Red Detachment of Women (1961) told of peasant girls who broke their chains and joined the Communist struggle, while The White-Haired Girl (1945, revised 1950) transformed a story of feudal exploitation into a socialist allegory of liberation. As Chengcheng You notes, these works were designed with a dual purpose: to stir emotion and to instruct. Audiences were not passive consumers but participants in the revolutionary process. Villagers wept when the White-Haired Girl triumphed over her landlord, because her suffering echoed their own, reframed in a nationalist-socialist key.

The figure of Lei Feng captures the Maoist transformation of storytelling into myth-making. A young soldier who died in 1962, Lei was posthumously turned into a paragon of selfless devotion to the Party. State media published his diary, filled with lines such as "Serve the people with all my heart." Schools, factories, and neighbourhood committees were instructed to "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng." Zhang points out that the Lei Feng story was consciously mythologised: his face became iconic, his deeds exaggerated, his name shorthand for socialist virtue. Much as Yue Fei once symbolised loyalty to the Song, Lei Feng became the moral exemplar of Maoist nationalism, loyal not to a dynasty but to the people and the Party.

Fig 11 A.

Fig 11 B.

Fig 11 C.

Fig 11: Model Operas (Yangbanxi) | A . Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao's proletarian line in literature and the arts, 1972 ; B . Revolutionary operas are good, 1976 ; C . Study revolutionary plays to become a revolutionary, 1972

Storytelling in this era also relied heavily on opera and performance, but is now tightly controlled by the state. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Jiang Qing promoted the "model operas" (yangbanxi), eight works that dominated the stage. Traditional tales of emperors, immortals, and filial daughters were swept aside, replaced with revolutionary heroes, soldiers, and workers. Bret Hinsch observes that this was both an iconoclasm and a continuity: the medium of opera, long a vehicle of dynastic cohesion, was appropriated for nationalist-socialist pedagogy. The stories changed, but the structure remained recognisable: epic struggles, moral clarity, collective triumph.

The Communist Party also reinterpreted older heroes through a revolutionary lens. Yue Fei reappeared in propaganda as a figure of resistance not against the Jurchen but against imperialists of the twentieth century. Mulan, once a filial daughter, was recast as a proto-revolutionary, fighting not just for family honour but for the people. Even the Yellow Emperor was invoked occasionally as the ancient ancestor of a people now standing tall under socialism. Neil Munro underlines this continuity: humiliation and glory, inferiority and superiority, were

the narrative tensions of Chinese identity. Maoism re-scripted them; China, once humiliated by foreign powers, now stood upright under Communist leadership.

It is important to see how storytelling functioned at every level of society. In villages, travelling troupes staged revolutionary operas. In cities, cinemas screened patriotic films. In schools, children memorised Mao's sayings and drew cartoons of heroes defeating landlords or American aggressors. Folktales were not eliminated but absorbed: local legends were rewritten to feature class struggle or peasant solidarity. As Chengcheng You shows, the Party was meticulous in ensuring that every cultural form, from picture books to puppet theatre, served the larger narrative of national unity and revolutionary purpose.

The tone of these stories was different from that of the May Fourth era. Where Lu Xun had used satire and despair to jolt readers awake, Maoist storytelling was relentlessly optimistic, filled with shining heroes and inevitable triumph. Critics might call it propagandistic, but for millions, it provided a sense of belonging and direction. A peasant watching The Red Detachment of Women did not merely see entertainment; he or she saw a world where ordinary people like themselves could defeat landlords, foreign armies, and natural disasters. The stories were aspirational scripts for national identity.

By the time Mao died in 1976, storytelling in China had been transformed. Myth, folktale, and opera had been retooled to serve the revolution; new heroes had been minted and old ones repurposed. Nationalism and socialism were entwined, inseparable in the stories people consumed daily. The continuity with earlier periods is clear: just as dynastic tales had provided cohesion, revolutionary stories provided mobilisation. What changed was the scale and the control. For the first time in Chinese history, storytelling was not only widespread but centrally orchestrated, a nationalised medium for shaping both memory and identity.

Reform, Popular Culture, and Nationalism after 1978

When the doors of reform opened in 1978, Chinese storytelling seemed to take a deep breath after decades of constraint. The language of revolution had dominated opera, fiction, and theatre under Mao, but with Deng Xiaoping's reforms came both an unravelling of control and a search for new anchors. Writers, teachers, and publishers asked a pressing question: how could China tell stories of itself now that the "revolutionary script" was no longer enough?

One of the earliest responses came in the form of scar literature (shanghen wenxue). Short stories like Lu Xinhua's Scar (1978) or Liu Xinwu's The Class Monitor gave voice to the traumas of the Cultural Revolution. These tales were not nationalist in the usual sense of glorifying heroes or recalling ancient myths, yet they performed an essential task: they re-centred the ordinary Chinese citizen as the subject of the nation's story. Bret Hinsch notes that nationalism always requires a "people" who can see themselves as belonging to a shared destiny. Scar literature helped reconstitute people by acknowledging pain and survival as a common inheritance. By the mid-1980s, writers turned toward what came to be known as root-seeking literature (xungen wenxue). Here, myth, folklore, and rural traditions were revalued as sources of authentic identity. Han Shaogong's Pa Pa Pa (1985), with its surreal rural setting, drew on folk motifs to suggest that national renewal required recovering cultural "roots."

Similarly, Mo Yan's Red Sorghum (1986) mixed history, legend, and earthy rural storytelling to portray peasant resistance

against Japanese invasion. These works echoed the older mythic tales of Yu the Great or Yue Fei, not by repeating them directly, but by reclaiming the moral and cultural landscape of rural China as the foundation of a resilient national identity.

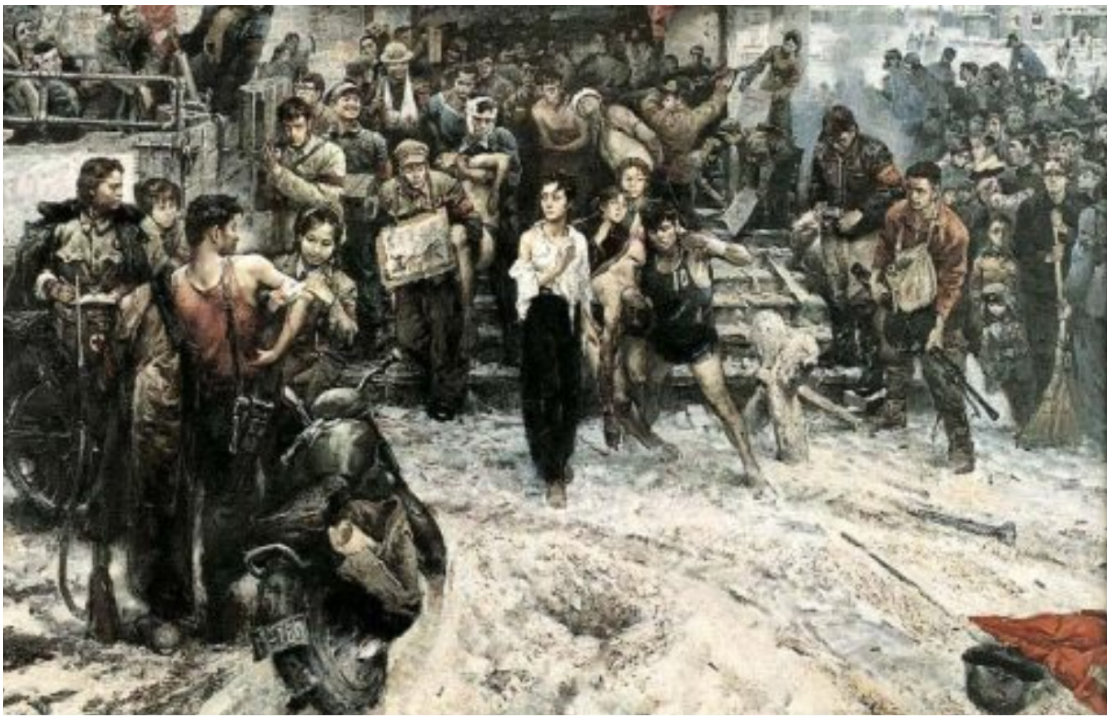


Fig. 12

Fig 12: A painting of an outcast family during the Cultural Revolution, by Chen Conglin, Source alphahistory.com

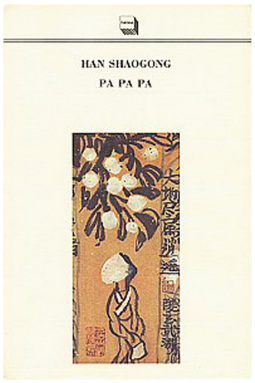


Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Fig 13: Han Shaogong's Pa Pa Pa (1985); Fig 14: Mo Yan's Red Sorghum (1986) ; Fig 15: The Monkey King, Library of Congress

Television also became a powerful medium for reintroducing classical tales to a mass

audience. The 1986 adaptation of Journey to the West brought Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, to millions of homes. For audiences who had grown up under the restricted cultural palette of the Cultural Revolution, seeing Monkey King's mischievous battles against demons was not only entertainment but a reconnection with heritage. Zhang observes that these broadcasts reinforced a sense of cultural continuity: while China was modernising rapidly, its ancient stories were not lost. They lived again, reinterpreted in colour and sound for a new era. Similarly, adaptations of Romance of the Three Kingdoms (1994) placed Guan Yu back at the centre of national imagination, his loyalty and righteousness resonating with older dynastic virtues but now accessible to television audiences across the country.

Alongside these retellings, children's literature and school curricula played a quiet but influential role. Simplified versions of tales like Yu the Great Controls the Flood, Mulan Joins the Army, and Yue Fei's Filial Devotion circulated widely in the 1980s and 1990s. These stories were framed less as revolutionary parables and more as moral lessons in perseverance, filiality, and patriotism. Chengcheng You points out that this educational use of folklore was key to bridging past and present: children learned that to be modern Chinese citizens was also to inherit an ancient lineage of heroes.

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

Fig 16: Romance of the Three Kingdoms (The Three heroes battle Lü Bu) 1982, July; Fig 17: Mulan as depicted in the album Gathering Gems of Beauty (Qing dynasty; ca 18th century), National Palace Museum, Taipei

Even in cinema, the most significant works of the reform era often leaned on historical tales rather than pure propaganda. The Opium War (1997), produced to mark Hong Kong's handover, dramatised nineteenth-century humiliation at foreign hands, reminding audiences of Yue Fei's timeless injunction to defend the homeland. Zhang Yimou's Hero went further, retelling the story of Qin Shihuang's unification. Though controversial, the film reframes Qin's ruthlessness as a sacrifice for national unity, echoing the old themes of cosmic order and Yu's taming of floods, now reinterpreted through a cinematic lens. As Neil Munro stresses, the oscillation between humiliation and glory continues to define China's identity stories.

Another strand of reform-era storytelling emerged in the revival of local folklore. Villages staged their own operas, often reintroducing tales of local deities,

ancestral founders, or legendary battles. While not always overtly nationalist, these performances tied local pride to the broader narrative of Chinese cultural survival. Bret Hinsch reminds us that nationalism in China has long relied on layering, myth, local tradition, and state narrative, reinforcing each other. The 1980s and 1990s demonstrated this layering vividly, as village festivals, schoolbooks, and blockbuster films all circulated overlapping stories of who the Chinese were.

What distinguished this period from the Maoist years was plurality. National identity was no longer shaped by a single script of revolutionary heroes. Instead, myths, folktales, historical epics, modern novels, and even imported genres mingled in the same cultural space. A child could read Mulan in a schoolbook, watch Monkey King on television, and later encounter Mo Yan's novels in high school, all narratives reinforcing, in different registers, that being Chinese meant belonging to a civilisation with deep roots and a resilient spirit.

By the close of the twentieth century, storytelling in China had become a mosaic. Old heroes and tales had returned, not as frozen relics but as living elements of a rapidly changing society. Reform allowed for experimentation, but it also produced a hunger for grounding, and it was in the voices of ancient heroes, folkloric legends, and rural landscapes that many found it. The result was a nationalism less about uniform mobilisation and more about cultural pride, a tapestry of stories that reached from the village stage to the global cinema screen.

Contemporary Nationalism and Global Storytelling (2010s–present)

The pluralism that emerged in the reform era, where a child could meet Mulan in a schoolbook, Monkey King on television, and Mo Yan in a novel, has only multiplied in the decades since. By the 2010s, this web of tales had spilt far beyond print and television into digital platforms, comics, memes, and science fiction. Storytelling in contemporary China is not only about cultural pride; it has become a vital mechanism in the ongoing creation of state identity, shaping how Chinese citizens imagine their nation and how that nation presents itself globally.

The surge of online fiction (wangluo xiaoshuo) demonstrates this vividly. Platforms like Qidian and Jinjiang host serialised works where heroes travel back to the Opium Wars or Japanese invasion, altering outcomes to restore sovereignty. Chengcheng You shows how such narratives rehearse the "century of humiliation" but rewrite it as triumph, offering readers the satisfaction of a strong, unbroken China. These tales reaffirm a shared national consciousness by fusing personal fantasy with collective destiny: to imagine oneself as the agent who saves the nation is to absorb nationalism at an intimate level. In this way, state identity is not only taught from above but lived imaginatively from below.

Chinese crime fiction has emerged in the last decade as a powerful site for negotiating questions of morality and order. Zijin Chen's novel Bad Kids, 2014, part of his detective trilogy often called the "Cat's Cradle" or "Hidden Corner", epitomises this shift. The story begins with three schoolchildren who inadvertently film a murder while exploring the mountains, but what unfolds is less a conventional thriller than a dissection of fractured families, institutional neglect, and the corrosive silence that surrounds wrongdoing. Rather than resolving neatly into a puzzle, the novel lingers on the weight of ethical compromise and the vulnerability of those least able to defend themselves.

Critics noted that while its surface followed global conventions of suspense writing, its underlying force lay in a distinctly Chinese

expectation: that stories of crime should also be stories of conscience. In this sense, Zijin Chen's work continues the moral mission of earlier narrative traditions, where Judge Bao's incorruptible verdicts or Judge Dee's intricate investigations served as public lessons in how justice ought to be imagined.

Fig. 18

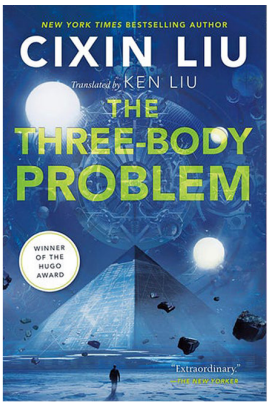
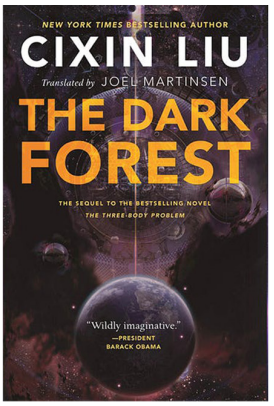


Fig. 19



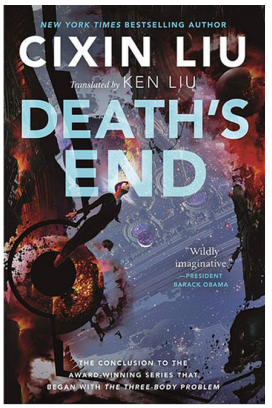


Fig 18: Bad Kids, http://www.crimesegments.com/ ; Fig 19: Remembrance of Earth's Past, Medium, Tor Books publishing

The 2020 television adaptation, The Bad Kids, carried these questions into the national conversation. Broadcast on iQiyi and widely discussed on Chinese social media, the series unsettled audiences with its stark portrayal of childhood entangled in adult corruption. Viewers debated whether the children were innocent victims, unwilling accomplices, or something in between, and whether the adults were trapped by circumstance or by their own moral failings. These debates echoed the participatory engagement of earlier audiences who judged the fairness of magistrates in opera or gong'an tales. What resonated most was not the crime itself but the way the story turned private failings into a mirror of social responsibility. By reframing a detective narrative as an exploration of collective ethics, Bad Kids demonstrates that contemporary Chinese storytelling, even when adopting the idioms of noir and psychological suspense, remains tied to the older conviction that narrative is a civic act—an arena where the community tests its conscience and reaffirms the fragile bonds of trust on which order depends.

Liu Cixin's Three-Body Problem trilogy carries the impulse of Chinese storytelling onto a cosmic stage. At its heart, the novels frame China as a decisive actor in humanity's survival, echoing the way older myths cast figures like Yu the Great as cosmic orderers taming floods. In Liu's hands, that ancient logic is recast for the twenty-first century: China becomes the rational force that holds chaos at bay, securing not just its own destiny but civilisation's.

Published between 2008 and 2010 under the collective title Remembrance of Earth's Past, the trilogy begins amid the Cultural Revolution and expands into a meditation on science, politics, and interstellar conflict. Its domestic impact was immense, with critics hailing it as the moment Chinese science fiction came of age and readers embracing its fusion of national history with speculative imagination. The 2014 English translation of the first volume by Ken Liu brought the series to a global audience, earning the Hugo Award in 2015—the first for an Asian author—and sparking

debates about how much of China's political and cultural resonance could be carried across languages. Later adaptations, from the Chinese television version to Netflix's 2023 series, highlighted further tensions of interpretation: whose vision counts as authentic, and what is lost or reconfigured when a Chinese story is retold abroad? In this sense, The Three-Body Problem not only extend Chinese narrative traditions into the genre of science fiction; it also illustrates how those traditions circulate, transform, and contest meaning on a global scale.

Meanwhile, visual storytelling formats like manhua (comics) and donghua (animation) bring ancient figures into direct dialogue with national identity. Comics during the 2008 Olympics depicted Monkey King battling "foreign demons" to safeguard the torch relay, explicitly fusing myth with sovereignty. Today's graphic narratives retell Mulan or Guan Yu with modern aesthetics, teaching loyalty, sacrifice, and patriotism in visually engaging ways. Zhang notes that these forms are powerful precisely because they are accessible: young readers internalise national ideals through familiar heroes re-skinned for the present. The result is identity-building by stealth, patriotism carried in panels and animation frames.

Television dramas contribute by dramatising loyalty and betrayal against the backdrop of dynastic China. Nirvana in Fire and The Legend of Miyue may be historical fiction, but they rehearse perennial questions: who is the rightful ruler? What does unity demand? How should subjects serve the state? These series model citizenship by suggesting that the legitimacy of a ruler, ancient or modern, lies in their ability to protect the people and maintain order. This links directly to what Neil Munro calls the dialectic of humiliation and glory: betrayals and defeats dramatise humiliation, but loyal protagonists reassert the glory of an enduring state.

The digital sphere adds another crucial layer. Memes and short videos on platforms like Weibo and Douyin repurpose figures like Guan Yu or Mulan to comment on foreign companies, territorial disputes, or global politics. A viral sticker of Guan Yu glaring at a map of Taiwan is not just a joke; it is a miniaturised performance of state identity. Neil Munro underlines how pride and grievance animate contemporary nationalism; memes make those affective poles portable, shareable, and repeatable. Through humour, anger, and creativity, citizens become co-authors of the nation's story.

The state itself amplifies these processes. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is narrated not merely as an economic policy but as a civilisational mission, using animations and documentaries that link it to the Silk Road, Zhang Qian, and Zheng He. This is storytelling as statecraft: framing modern geopolitics as the fulfilment of an ancient destiny. Bret Hinsch's argument that myths confer legitimacy applies seamlessly here. By projecting the BRI as continuity with millennia of outreach and leadership, China reaffirms itself as a historical state with a rightful global role.

Even interactive formats like video games contribute to this identity project. In Glorious Mission, developed with PLA backing, players take the role of Chinese soldiers defending sovereignty. Here, identity is not read but enacted. Players embody the nationalist ideal of sacrifice and defence, experiencing themselves as part of the state. This is perhaps the most direct form of what Benedict Anderson once called "imagined communities": the nation not just imagined in print but inhabited through play.

Taken together, these diverse forms reveal a striking continuity: myths of Pangu, Yu the Great, Mulan, Guan Yu, and Yue Fei still circulate, but now refracted through comics, memes, novels, and games. The medium has changed; the function endures. Nationalist storytelling remains the linchpin of identity-

making, ensuring that the state is not an abstraction but a living story, repeated daily in classrooms, on screens, and across digital platforms. In this sense, contemporary storytelling is less about inventing new myths than about equipping old ones to carry the weight of twenty-first-century statehood.

Conclusion: Storytelling and the Making of Chinese Identity

Looking back across two millennia of Chinese storytelling, what stands out is less the invention of wholly new tales than the extraordinary capacity of old ones to endure, adapt, and serve new purposes. Myths of Pangu splitting heaven from earth or Yu taming the floods, first told to legitimise dynasties, did not vanish with the fall of those dynasties. Instead, they resurfaced in later centuries, recast through Confucian morality, patriotic poems, revolutionary dramas, school textbooks, online novels, and digital memes. At each stage, the stories carried with them a way of imagining what it meant to belong to China, what the state was for, and how its people should act.

This endurance was not limited to myths of cosmic creation or dynastic heroes. Figures such as Bao Zheng, the incorruptible Song magistrate, and Di Renjie, the Tang detective-magistrate immortalised in gong'an case collections, show how legal storytelling also became part of the national repertoire. Their popularity in opera, fiction, and later global translations demonstrates that Chinese identity has long been imagined not only through ancestry and sacrifice but also through justice and moral order.

National identity in China has thus been profoundly narrative in character. Yue Fei's loyalty, Mulan's filial courage, Monkey King's irrepressible spirit, and Guan Yu's righteousness became moral exemplars not only for individuals but also for the community as a whole. They embodied values that linked family duty to national service, or cosmic order to political unity. As Bret Hinsch reminds us, Chinese nationalism did not begin in the nineteenth century; it had been centuries in the making through precisely these narrative traditions.

With the crises of the late Qing and Republican eras, the same figures gained a sharper political edge. Lu Xun's Ah Q mocked complacency; Lei Feng's diary became a socialist parable; Mao-era operas turned folk heroes into revolutionary models. After 1978, pluralism returned: novels and television dramas allowed ancient epics and rural folklore to flourish again, while contemporary media, from Liu Cixin's science fiction to patriotic memes on Weibo, continue to carry the story forward. Liu Cixin's Three-Body Problem trilogy (2008–2010) pushes these traditions outward onto a cosmic stage. Beginning in the Cultural Revolution and unfolding into interstellar conflict, it positions China as a decisive actor in humanity's survival. The 2014 English translation by Ken Liu, which won the Hugo Award in 2015, brought the trilogy to global attention and sparked debates about how Chinese narratives are transmitted across languages and media. Later screen adaptations, including Netflix's 2023 version, highlighted tensions of representation and authenticity, reminding readers that stories not only travel but are reshaped by the contexts in which they appear. At home, the trilogy has been read as proof of China's imaginative strength; abroad, it has become a landmark of world science fiction. What changes is the medium and the emphasis, not the function: stories make the nation legible to itself.

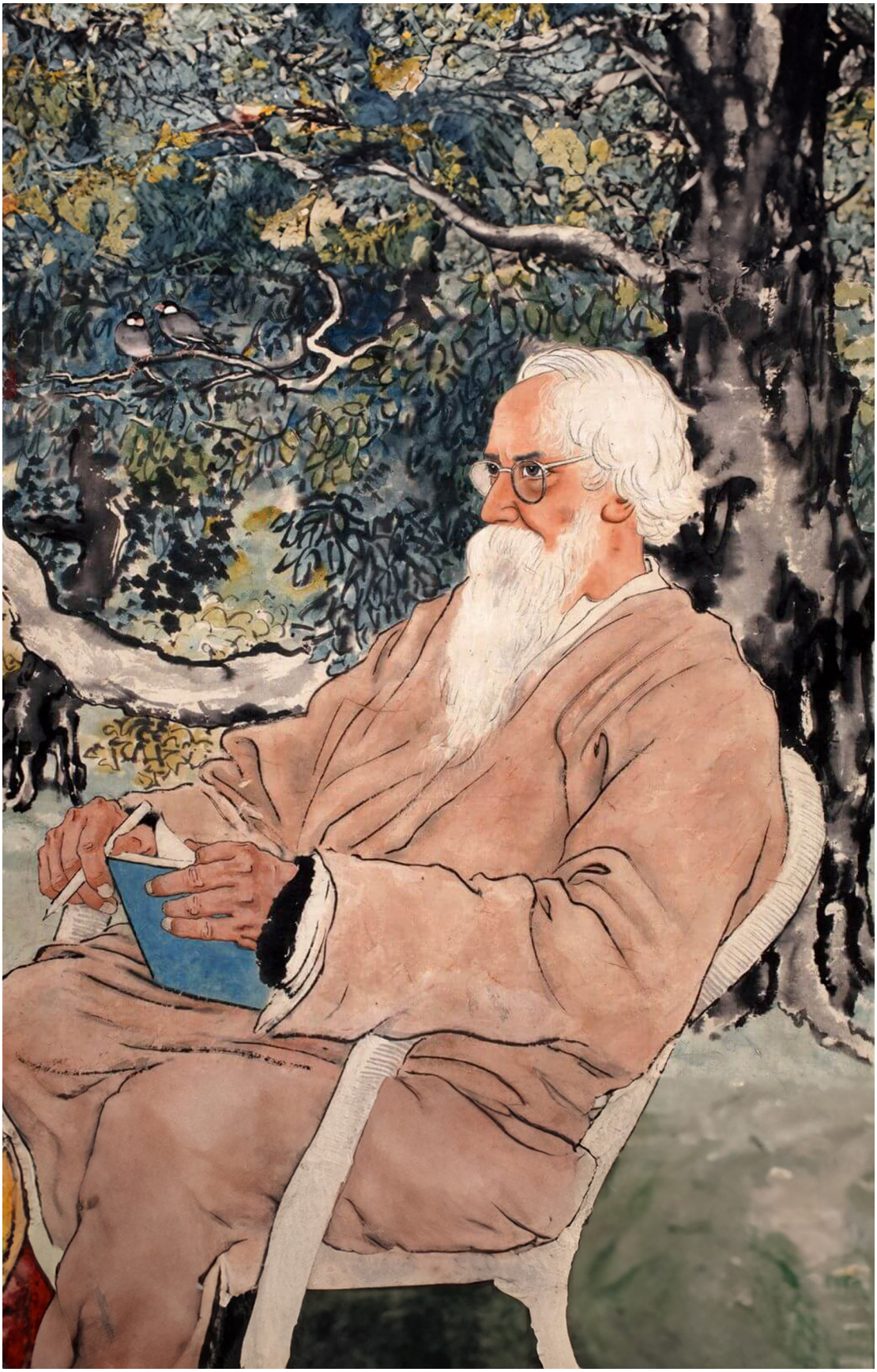
Equally important, these stories have helped construct state identity. The Yellow Emperor is not just an ancestor but a symbol of

political unity; Yu the Great's flood control stands as a template for order imposed by legitimate rule; modern adaptations of Mulan or Guan Yu teach not simply virtue but loyalty to the state as protector of the people. In the twenty-first century, projects like the Belt and Road Initiative are wrapped in narratives of Zhang Qian and Zheng He, explicitly tying statecraft to mythic destiny. Here, storytelling operates as soft power at home and abroad, presenting China as both an ancient civilisation and a modern state.

The cumulative effect is powerful. For citizens, these narratives provide continuity across ruptures, a sense that China has always been, and will always be, a coherent entity with a shared destiny. For observers outside China, the same stories shape perceptions: China is seen variously as a civilisation steeped in loyalty and order, as a victim of historical humiliation, or as a resurgent power reclaiming its rightful place.

There is no single "reading" of these stories. For some, they affirm state legitimacy; for others, they inspire cultural pride or moral reflection. They can be instruments of mobilisation, but also of humour, satire, and local identity. Precisely because they are layered, flexible, and resonant, they have survived dynasties, revolutions, reforms, and the digital age.

In the end, what the evolution of Chinese storytelling demonstrates is that the nation is not only a political structure or an economic force. It is also, and perhaps above all, a narrative community, one that has been told into being over centuries. To study the myths, folktales, novels, dramas, comics, and films is to see how China has repeatedly crafted and recrafted both its national soul and its state form. The stories endure because they are more than entertainment; they are the very language through which China understands itself and shows itself to the world. ■



from the archives.

Civilisation & Progress

RABINDRANATH TAGORE IN CHINA

A Chinese author writes: "The terribly tragic aspect of the situation in China is that, while the Chinese nation is called upon to throw away its own civilisation and adopt the civilisation of modern Europe, there is not one single educated man in the whole Empire who has the remotest idea of what this modern European civilisation really is."

I have read elsewhere an observation made by a Frenchman, quoted in a magazine, in which he says that China is not a country but a civilisation. Not having read the full discussion, I cannot be certain what he means. But it seems to me that, according to the writer, China represents an ideal and not the production and collection of certain things, or of information of a particular character about the nature of things; that is to say, it stands for not merely progress in wealth and knowledge and power but a philosophy of life and the art of living.

The word "civilisation" being a European word, we have hardly yet taken the trouble to find out its real meaning. For over a century we have accepted it, as we may accept a gift horse, with perfect trust, never caring to count its teeth. Only very lately we have begun to wonder if we realise in its truth what the western people mean when they speak of civilisation. We ask ourselves, "Has it the same meaning as some word in our own language which denotes for us the idea of human perfection?"

Civilisation cannot merely be a growing totality of happenings that by chance have assumed a particular shape and tendency which we consider to be excellent. It must be the expression of some guiding moral force which we have evolved in our society for the object of attaining perfection. The word "perfection" has a simple and definite meaning when applied to an inanimate thing, or even to a creature whose life has principally a biological significance. But man being complex and always on the path of transcending himself, the meaning of the word "perfection" as applied to him cannot be crystallised into an inflexible idea. This has made it possible for different races to have different shades of definition for this term.

The Sanskrit word dharma is the nearest synonym in our own language, that occurs to me, for the word civilisation. In fact, we have no other word except perhaps some newly-coined one, lifeless and devoid

of atmosphere. The specific meaning of dharma is that principle which holds us firm together and leads us to our best welfare. The general meaning of this word is the essential quality of a thing. Dharma for man is the best expression of what he is in truth. He may reject dharma and may choose to be an animal or a machine and thereby may not injure himself, may even gain strength and wealth from an external and material point of view; yet this will be worse than death for him as a man. It has been said in our scriptures: Through a-dharma (the negation of dharma) man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root.

One who is merely a comfortable money-making machine does not carry in himself the perfect manifestations of man. He is like a gaudily embroidered purse which is empty. He may raise a rich altar in his life to the blind and deaf image of a yawning negation, and all the costly sacrifices continually offered to it are poured into the mouth of an ever-hungry abyss. And according to our scriptures, even while he swells and shouts and violently gesticulates, he perishes.

Here's the cleaned version of this section — spelling, formatting, and stray page numbers fixed, but without rewriting Tagore's words:

The same idea has been expressed by the great Chinese sage, Lao-tze, in a different manner, where he says: One who may die, but will not perish, has life everlasting. In this he also suggests that when a man reveals his truth he lives, and that truth itself is dharma. Civilisation according to this ideal should be the expression of man's dharma in his corporate life.

We have for over a century been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot, choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, humbled by our own helplessness, and overwhelmed by the speed. We agreed to acknowledge that this chariot-drive was progress, and that progress was civilisation. If we ever ventured to ask, "Progress towards what, and progress for whom?"—it was considered to be peculiarly and ridiculously oriental to entertain such doubts about the absoluteness of progress. Of late, a voice has come to us bidding us to take count not only of the scientific perfection of the chariot but of the depth of the ditches lying across its path.

Lately I read a paragraph in The Nation—the American weekly which is more frank than prudent in its espousal of truth—discussing the bombing of the Mahsud villages in Afghanistan by some British airmen. The incident commented upon by this paper happened when "one of the bombing planes made a forced landing in the middle of a Mahsud village," and when "the airmen emerged unhurt from the wreckage only to face a committee of five or six old women, who had happened to escape the bombs, brandishing dangerous-looking knives."

The Editor quotes from The London Times which runs thus:

"A delightful damsel took the airmen under her wing and led them to a cave close by, and a malik (chieftain) took up his position at the entrance, keeping off the crowd of forty who had gathered round, shouting and waving knives. Bombs were still being dropped from the air, so the crowd, envious of the security of the cave, pressed in stiflingly, and the airmen pushed their way out in the teeth of the hostile demonstration. They were fed and were visited by neighbouring maliks, who were most friendly, and by a mullah (priest), who was equally pleasant. Women looked after the feeding arrangements, and supplies from Ladha and Razmak arrived safely. On the evening of the twenty-fourth they were escorted to Ladha, where they arrived at daybreak the next day. The escort disguised their captives as Mahsuds as a precaution against attack. It is significant that the airmen's defenders were first found in the

younger generation of both sexes."

In the above narrative the fact comes out strongly that the West has made wonderful progress. She has opened her path across the ethereal region of the earth; the explosive force of the bombs has developed its mechanical power of wholesale destruction to a degree that could be represented in the past only by the personal valour of a large number of men. But such enormous progress has made Man diminutive. He proudly imagines that he expresses himself when he displays the things that he produces and the power that he holds in his hands. The bigness of the results and the mechanical perfection of the apparatus hide from him the fact that the Man in him has been smothered.

When I was a child I had the freedom to make my own toys out of trifles and create my own games from imagination. In my happiness my playmates had their full share; in fact the complete enjoyment of my games depended upon their taking part in them. One day, in this paradise of our childhood, entered a temptation from the market world of the adult.

A toy bought from an English shop was given to one of our companions: it was perfect, it was big, wonderfully life-like. He became proud of the toy and less mindful of the game; he kept that expensive thing carefully away from us, glorying in his exclusive possession of it, feeling himself superior to his playmates whose toys were cheap. I am sure if he could use the modern language of history he would say that he was more civilised than ourselves to the extent of his owning that ridiculously perfect toy.

One thing he failed to realise in his excitement—a fact which at the moment seemed to him insignificant—was that this temptation obscured something a great deal more perfect than his toy: the revelation of the perfect child. The toy merely expressed his wealth, but not the child's creative spirit, not the child's generous joy in his play, his open invitation to all who were his compeers to his play-world.

Those people who went to bomb the Mahsud villages measured their civilisation by the perfect effectiveness of their instruments which were their latest scientific toys. So strongly do they realise the value of these things that they are ready to tax to the utmost limit of endurance their own people, as well as those others who may occasionally have the chance to taste in their own persons the deadly perfection of these machines. This tax does not merely consist in money but in humanity. These people put the birth rate of the toy against the death rate of man; and they seem happy. Their science makes their prodigious success so utterly cheap on the material side that they do not care to count the cost which their spirit has to bear.

On the other hand, those Mahsuds that protected the airmen—who had come to kill them wholesale, men, women and children—were primitively crude in their possession of life's toys. But they showed the utmost carefulness in proving their human truth through which they could express their personality. From the so-called Nordic point of view, the point of view of the would-be rulers of men, this was foolish.

According to a Mahsud, hospitality is a quality by which he is known as a man and therefore he cannot afford to miss his opportunity, even when dealing with someone who can be systematically relentless in enmity. From the practical point of view, the Mahsud pays for this very dearly, as we must always pay for that which we hold most valuable. It is the mission of civilisation to set for us the right standard of valuation. The Mahsud may have many faults for which he should be held accountable; but that which has imparted for him more value to hospitality than to revenge may not be called progress, but is

certainly civilisation.

The ruthlessness, which at a time of crisis disdains to be too scrupulous in extirpating some cause of trouble, and uses its indiscriminate weapon against the guilty and the innocent, the combatant and the non-combatant, is certainly useful. Through such thoroughly unfeeling methods men prosper, they find what they consider desirable, they conquer their enemies—but there they stop, incomplete.

We can imagine some awful experiment in creation that began at the tail end and abruptly stopped when the stomach was finished. The creature's power of digestion is perfect, so it goes on growing stout, but the result is not beautiful. At the beginning of the late war, when monstrosities of this description appeared in various forms, Western humanity shrank for a moment at the sight.

But now she seems to admire them, for they are fondly added to other broods of ugliness in her nursery. Terrific movements, produced by such abnormalities of truncated life, may widen the path of what is called progress for those who want to be rulers of men, but certainly they do not belong to civilisation.

Once there was an occasion for me to motor down to Calcutta from a place a hundred miles away. Something wrong with the mechanism made it necessary for us to have a repeated supply of water almost every half an hour. At the first village where we were compelled to stop, we asked the help of a man to find water for us. It proved quite a task for him, but when we offered him his reward, poor though he was, he refused to accept it. In fifteen other villages the same thing happened.

In a hot country where travellers constantly need water, and where the water supply grows scanty in summer, the villagers consider it their duty to offer water to those who need it. They could easily make a business out of it, following the inexorable law of demand and supply. But the ideal which they consider to be their dharma has become one with their life. To ask them to sell it is like asking them to sell their life. They do not claim any personal merit for possessing it.

Lao-tze, speaking about the man who is truly good, says: He quickens, but owns not. He acts, but claims not. Merit he accomplishes, but dwells not on it. Since he does not dwell on it, it will never leave him. That which is outside ourselves we can sell, but that which is one with our life we cannot. This complete assimilation of truth belongs to the paradise of perfection; it lies beyond the purgatory of self-consciousness. To have reached it proves a long process of civilisation.

To be able to take a considerable amount of trouble in order to supply water to a passing stranger and yet never to claim merit or reward for it seems absurdly and negligibly simple compared with the capacity to produce an amazing number of things per minute. A millionaire tourist ready to corner the food market and grow rich by driving the whole world to the brink of starvation is sure to feel too superior to notice this simple thing while rushing through our villages at sixty miles an hour. For it is not aggressive like a telegraph pole that pokes our attention with its hugely long finger, or resounding like his own motor engine that shouts its discourtesy to the silent music of the spheres. Yes, it is simple; but that simplicity is the product of centuries of culture; that simplicity is difficult of imitation. In a few years' time it might be possible for me to learn how to make holes in thousands of needles instantaneously by turning a wheel, but to be absolutely simple in one's hospitality to one's enemy or to a stranger requires generations of training. Simplicity takes no account of its own value, claims no wages, and therefore those who are enamoured of power do not realise

that simplicity of spiritual expression is the highest product of civilisation.

The process of disintegration can kill this rare fruit of a higher life, as a whole race of birds possessing some rare beauty can be made extinct by the vulgar power of avarice which has civilised weapons.

This fact was clearly proved to me when I found that the only place where a price was expected for the water given to us was when we reached a suburb of Calcutta, where life was richer, the water supply easier and more abundant, and where progress flowed in numerous channels in all directions. We must get to know this force of disintegration, and how it works.

Creation is the revelation of truth through the rhythm of form, its dualism consisting of the expression and the material. Of these, the material must offer itself as a sacrifice in absolute loyalty to the expression. It must know that it can be no end in itself and therefore by the pressure of its voluminousness it should not carry men away from their creative activities.

In India we have a species of Sanskrit poem in which all the complex grammatical rules are deliberately illustrated. This produces continual sparks of delight in the minds of some readers, who, even in a work of art, seek some tangible proof of power, almost physical in its manifestation. This shows that by special cultivation a kind of mentality can be produced which is capable of taking delight in the mere spectacle of power, manipulating materials, forgetting that materials have no value of their own.

We see the same thing in the modern western world where progress is measured by the speed with which materials are multiplying. Their measure by horse-power is one before which spirit-power has made itself humble. Horse-power drives, spirit-power sustains. That which drives is called the principle of progress, that which sustains we call dharma; and this word dharma I believe should be translated as civilisation.

We have heard from the scientist that an atom consists of a nucleus drawing its companions round it in a rhythm of dance and thus forms a perfect unit. A civilisation remains healthy and strong as long as it contains in its centre some creative ideal that binds its members in a rhythm of relationship. It is a relationship which is beautiful and not merely utilitarian. When this creative ideal, which is dharma, gives place to some overmastering passion, then this civilisation bursts into conflagration like a star that has lighted its own funeral pyre. From its modest moderation of light this civilisation flares up into a blaze of the first magnitude, only for its boisterous brilliancy to end in violent extinction.

Western society, for some ages, had for its central motive force a great spiritual ideal and not merely an impetus to progress. It had its religious faith which was actively busy in bringing about reconciliation among the conflicting forces of society. What it held to be of immense value was the perfection of human relationship, to be obtained by controlling the egoistic instincts of man, and by giving him a philosophy of his fundamental unity. In the course of the last two centuries, however, the West found access to Nature's storehouse of power, and ever since all its attention has irresistibly been drawn in that direction. Its inner ideal of civilisation has thus been pushed aside by the love of power.

Man's ideal has for its field of activity the whole of human nature from its depth to its height. The light of this ideal is gentle because diffused, its life is subdued because all-embracing. It is serene because it is great; it is meek because it is comprehensive. But our passion is narrow; its limited field gives it an intensity of impulse. Such an aggressive force of greed has of late possessed the western mind. This has happened within a

very short period, and has created a sudden deluge of things smothering all time and space over the earth. All that was human is being broken into fragments.

In trying to maintain some semblance of unity among such a chaos of fractions, organisations are established for manufacturing, in a wholesale quantity, peace, or piety, or social welfare. But such organisations can never have the character of a perfect unit. Surely they are needed as we need our drinking vessels, but more for the water than for themselves. They are mere burdens by themselves as they are; and if we take pleasure in multiplying them indefinitely the result may be astoundingly clever, but crushingly fatal to life.

I have read somewhere an observation of Plato in which he says: "An intelligent and socialised community will continue to grow only as long as it can remain a unit; beyond that point growth must cease, or the community will disintegrate and cease to be an organic being." That spirit of the unit is only maintained when its nucleus is some living sentiment of dharma, leading to co-operation and to a common sharing of life's gifts.

Lao-tze has said: Not knowing the eternal causes passions to rise; and that is evil. Comforts and conveniences are pursued, things are multiplied, the eternal is obscured, the passions are roused, and the evil marches triumphant from continent to continent, mutilating man and crushing under its callous tread life's bloom—the product of the Mother-heart that dwells in the sanctuary of human nature. And we are asked to build triumphal arches for this march of death. Let us at least refuse to acknowledge its victory, even if we cannot retard its progress. Let us die, as your Lao-tze has said, and yet not perish.

It is said in our scriptures: In greed is sin, in sin, death. Your philosopher has said: No greater calamity than greed. These sentences carry the wisdom of ages. When greed becomes the dominant character of a people it forebodes destruction for them, and no mere organisation like the League of Nations can ever save them. To let the flood of self-seeking flow unchecked from the heart of the Nation and at the same time try to build an outer dam across its path can never succeed. The deluge will burst forth with a greater force because of the resistance. Lao-tze says: Not self-seeking, he gaineth life. Life's principle is in this and therefore in a society all the trainings and teachings that make for life are those that help us in our control of selfish greed.

When civilisation was living, that is to say, when most of its movements were related to an inner ideal and not to an external compulsion, then money had not the same value as it has now. Do you not realise what an immense difference that fact has made in our life, and how barbarously it has cheapened those things which are invaluable in our inheritance? We have grown so used to this calamitous change that we do not fully realise the indignity it imposes upon us.

I ask you to imagine a day, if it does ever come, when in a meeting everybody will leave his chair and stand up in awe if a man enters there who has a greater number of human skulls strung in his necklace than have his fellow beings.

We can have no hesitation to-day in admitting that this would be pure barbarism. Are there no other tokens of a similar degradation for man? Are there no other forms of human skulls than those which the savages so proudly wear? In olden times the mere hoarding of millions was never considered as wealth unless it had some crown of glory with which to proclaim its ideal greatness. In the East as well as in the West, man, in order to save his inherent dignity, positively despised money that represented merely a right of possession and no moral responsibility. Money-making as a profession was everywhere contemptuously

treated, and men who made big profits the sole end of their life were looked down upon.

There was a time in India when our Brahmins were held in reverence, not only for their learning and purity of life, but for their utter indifference to material wealth. This only shows that our society was fully conscious that its very life depended upon its ideals, which were never to be insulted by anything that belonged to a passion for self-seeking.

But because to-day progress is considered to be characteristic of civilisation, and because this progress goes on gathering an unending material extension, money has established its universal sovereignty. For in this world of ambition money is the central power-house sending impulsions in all directions.

In former days, the monarchs of men were not ashamed humbly to pay their respect to men of intellect or those who had spiritual or creative gifts. For the qualities of the higher life were the motive force of the civilisation of those times. But to-day, men, whatever their position, never think that they are humiliating themselves when they offer their homage to men of corpulent cash, not always because they expect any benefit therefrom, but because of the bare fact of its possession. This denotes a defeat of the complete man by the material man.

This huge degradation, like a slimy reptile, has spread its coils round the whole human world. Before we can rescue humanity from the bondage of its interminable tail, we must free our mind from the sacrilege of worship offered to this unholy power, this evil dragon which can never be the presiding deity of the civilisation of man.

I am sure you know that this soulless progeny of greed has already opened its elastic jaws wide over the fair limbs of your country, wider perhaps than in any other part of the world. I earnestly hope that you will develop some means to rescue her from her destination towards the hollow of its interior.

But the danger is not so much from the enemy who attacks, but from the defender who may betray. It fills my heart with a great feeling of dismay when, among your present generation of young men, I see signs of their succumbing to the depravity of fascination for an evil power which allures with its enormity. They go about seeking for civilisation amongst the wilderness of sky-scrapers, in the shrieking headlines of news-journals, and the shouting vociferation of demagogues. They leave their own great prophets who had a far-seeking vision of truth, and roam in the dusk begging for the loan of light from some glow-worm which can only hold its niggardly lantern for the purpose of crawling towards its nearest dust.

They will learn the meaning of the word civilisation when they come back home and truly understand what their great master, Lao-tze, wanted to teach when he said: Those who have virtue attend to their obligations; those who have no virtue attend to their claims.

In this saying he has expressed in a few words what I have tried to explain in this paper. Progress which is not related to an inner ideal, but to an attraction which is external, seeks to satisfy our endless claims. But civilisation, which is an ideal, gives us power and joy to fulfil our obligations.

About the stiffening of life and hardening of heart caused by the organisation of power and production, he says with profound truth:

The grass as well as the trees, while they live, are tender and supple; when they die they are rigid and dry. Thus the hard and the strong are the companions of death. The tender and the delicate are the companions of life. Therefore he who in arms is strong will not conquer. The strong and the great

stay below. The tender and the delicate stay above.

Our sage in India says, as I have quoted before: By the help of a-dharma men prosper, they find what they desire, they conquer enemies, but they perish at the root. The wealth which is not welfare grows with a rapid vigour, but it carries within itself the seed of death. This wealth has been nourished in the West by the blood of men and the harvest is ripening. The same warning was also given centuries ago by your sage when he said: Things thrive and then grow old. This is called Un-Reason. Un-Reason soon ceases. Your teacher has said: To increase life is called a blessing. For the increase of life, unlike the increase of things, never transcends the limits of life's unity. The mountain pine grows tall and great, its every inch maintains the rhythm of an inner balance, and therefore even in its seeming extravagance it has the reticent grace of self-control. The tree and its productions belong to the same vital system of cadence; the timber, leaves, flowers and fruits are one with the tree; their exuberance is not a malady of exaggeration, but a blessing. But systems which mainly are for making profits and not for supplying life's needs encourage an obesity of ugliness in our society, obliterating the fine modulations of personality from its features. Not being one with our life, they do not conform to its rhythm.

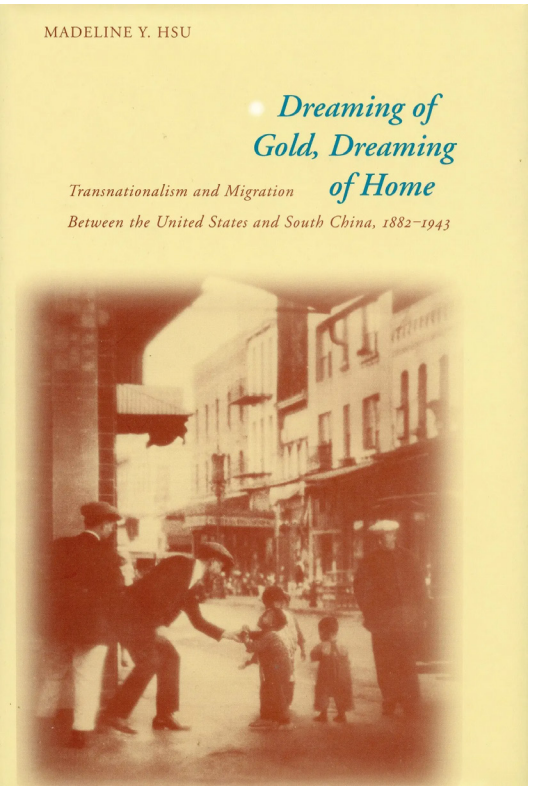
Our living society, which should have dance in its steps, music in its voice, beauty in its limbs, which should have its metaphor in stars and flowers, maintaining its harmony with God's creation, becomes, under the tyranny of a prolific greed, like an overladen market-cart jolting and creaking on the road that leads from things to the Nothing, tearing ugly ruts across the green life till it breaks down under the burden of its vulgarity on the wayside, reaching nowhere. For this is called Un-Reason, as your teacher has said, and Un-Reason soon ceases. ■

book review.

Adil Thanveer

This book is a deeply researched, richly textured account of the Taishanese diaspora that interrogates both the underpinnings and consequences of migration between Taishan County in Guangdong and the United States across the exclusion era and into the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing upon Chinese- and English-language archival sources and oral histories, as well as a sophisticated engagement with theoretical models of migration and identity, Hsu's work is a model of transnational scholarship—one that bridges the sometimes siloed fields of Asian American and Asian studies to present an elastic, multidirectional history of migration, rooted at once in local tradition and global mobility.

The introduction establishes the theoretical and historical foundation for the book and advances the idea of an "elastic community" that transcends national boundaries. Hsu highlights the remarkable significance of Taishan, a single county that contributed more than half of all Chinese immigrants to the United States before 1960. She shows how local social and demographic pressures—overpopulation, poverty, land scarcity, political instability—intersected with external economic opportunities, such as the California gold rush and the expanding urban economy of the American West, to catalyse mass migration. Against a backdrop in which both Chinese and American states sought to regulate and restrict mobility, Taishanese migrants developed intricate networks of kinship, commerce, and local loyalty. These networks sustained survival and created a transnational social field maintained through remittances, correspondence, and repeated journeys.



Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882–1943 by Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, Stanford University Press, 2000.

The first substantive chapter, "California Dreaming: Migration and Dependency," situates the reader in pre-migration Taishan, wracked by insecurity but also grounded in long traditions of clan organisation. Hsu shows that the lure of "Gold Mountain" was not simply mythical but yielded tangible benefits: houses and schools were built, and entire villages sustained by remittances. Yet dependency created new tensions, from conspicuous consumption and inflation to vulnerabilities linked to global crises such

as the Great Depression. The emergence of Gold Mountain wives controlling remittance flows and the shifting roles of returnees reveal how local expectations were continually shaped by global opportunities.

"Slipping Through the Golden Gate: Immigration Under Chinese Exclusion" turns to the legal and social challenges confronting Taishanese migrants after the Chinese Exclusion Act. Hsu avoids reducing this story to victimhood, instead illustrating how migrants mobilised kinship networks and native-place associations to evade the American state. Coaching books, paper-son identities, and collective preparation enabled entry into hostile conditions. The chapter also reframes the so-called "bachelor society" of American Chinatowns. What is often depicted as social pathology is instead analysed as the product of exclusionary laws and the enduring primacy of Taishan-based families. Migration to the United States was less about settlement than about sustaining households at home.

The following chapter, "Surviving the Gold Mountain Dream: Taishanese American Families," examines family life under the strains of forced sojourning. Drawing on oral histories and Chinese-language sources, Hsu challenges stereotypes of perpetual bachelorhood by demonstrating the persistence of extended transnational families. Separation reshaped gender roles, with wives gaining autonomy and managing property, finances, and education. Children were raised in households where fathers were often absent but remained vital providers from afar. Through chain migration and return, village economies and social structures were constantly reconfigured. Hsu's account makes clear that absence and mobility were not exceptions but central features of Taishanese family life.

In the chapter "Magazines as Marketplaces: A Community in Dispersion," Hsu makes a significant contribution to our understanding of diasporic identity and communication through her analysis of qiaokan overseas Chinese magazines. These publications connected Taishan not only to dispersed communities in North America and Southeast Asia but also facilitated a continuous dialogue of news, philanthropy, and solidarity. They functioned as marketplaces of information, forging alliances and testing the limits of local and national interests. Subscription fees, distribution networks, and editorial content—meticulously documented—revealed the ambitions of both clan and district associations, cultivating migrant loyalties, soliciting contributions, and sustaining moral and ideological ties to native place. The dynamism of these mediated networks challenges any easy assumption of assimilation or the loss of tradition.

The penultimate chapter, "Heroic Returns: The Railroad Empire of Chen Yixi, 1904–1939," offers perhaps the most compelling case study. Through the career of Chen Yixi—a merchant, labour contractor, and engineer who built wealth in Seattle before returning to Taishan with grand modernising ambitions—Hsu probes the potential and the limits of transnational entrepreneurship. Chen's efforts to construct the Xinning Railroad, intended to integrate Taishan into global trade, were ultimately thwarted by local resistance, state corruption, and the broader turmoil of Chinese history. Yet his story gives the abstraction of "return" a human face, embodying both triumph and failure, and prompting critical questions about the meanings of change, loyalty, and modernity in the diasporic imagination.

The concluding chapter, "Unravelling the Bonds of Native Place," brings together the themes of mobility, identity, and transformation. World War II, the Communist Revolution, and the 1965 U.S. immigration reforms marked decisive ruptures. The traditional circuits of return

and loyalty weakened: Taishanese migrants and their descendants increasingly invested not in the prospect of going home but in futures as Americans. Rituals of remittance, the mythos of sojourning, and hopes of return gradually receded. Hsu interprets this not as loss but as a historical shift shaped by personal choices, global politics, and economic pressures.

Throughout, Hsu avoids sentimentality and resists romanticisation. Her analysis both engages with and complicates the migration-history paradigm of loyalty to native place, warning against reductive readings. She portrays migrant strategies as products of both necessity and agency, and insists that assimilation and exclusion are not opposites but conditions negotiated within transnational lives. In doing so, she presents a subtle, layered image of identity—where sojourning, marginalisation, autonomy, and reinvention are not aberrations but central to migrant experience.

Ultimately, Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home is not only a landmark in transnational history but also a model of social history. Hsu equips readers with new tools to grasp the legacies of migration by rejecting narrow national frameworks and embracing the multi-layered realities of communities spanning generations and oceans. Her chapters are more than thematic studies; each serves as an analytic prism through which the contradictory, creative, and often painful processes of diaspora are revealed. This balance of archival depth, theoretical precision, and empathetic storytelling ensures the book's continuing significance for Asian American history, migration studies, and the wider humanities.■

book review.

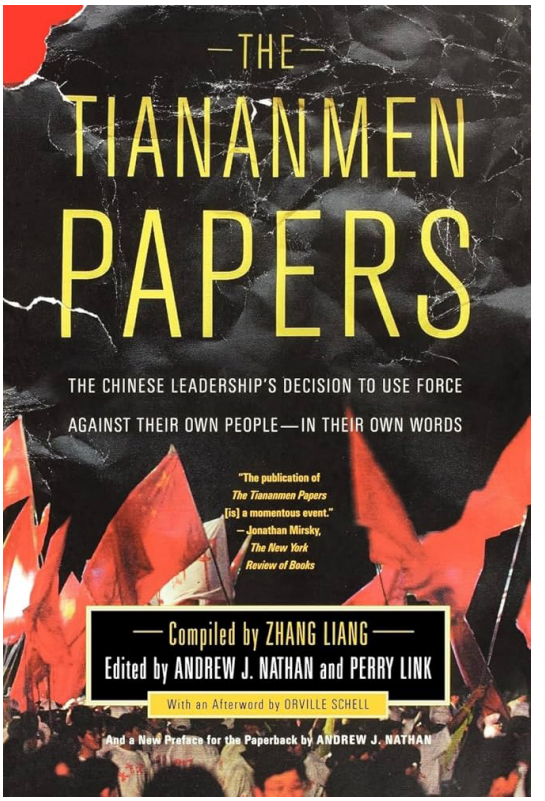
Aaqib Hayat

In 2001, The Tiananmen Papers created a huge sensation on its first appearance. Edited by Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, the book claims to contain leaked internal documents from the ruling Chinese Communist Party, offering an unusual window into the politics of decision-making that led to the violent suppression of the student-led protests in June 1989. For the first time, people outside the Party were able to see not just the outcome but also the tense debates, ideological clashes and personal anxieties that shaped one of modern China's most defining events.

Two decades on, the text remains a vital source for understanding authoritarian politics across the globe. The book is both a historical archive and a political text, showing how rulers confronted dissent, fear and force.

Organised chronologically, it covers April to June 1989. It begins with the death of reformist leader Hu Yaobang, whose passing sparked spontaneous turnout in Beijing. From there, the documents trace the student demonstrations, the government's increasingly sharp response, and the prolonged clash between reformists, led by Zhao Ziyang, and hardliners such as Premier Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping.

Through transcripts, meeting notes and directives, the book describes Zhongnanhai, the Party leadership compound, where debates about stability, socialism and "turmoil" dominated the agenda. The documents show how the decision to impose martial law was reached, unleashing the People's Liberation Army onto the streets of Beijing — a decision that claimed thousands of lives and reshaped the trajectory of Chinese politics.



The Tiananmen Papers by Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, Little, Brown Book Group, 2002

Demystification is the very nature of The Tiananmen Papers, which makes it compelling. Within academia it has been described as a glimpse into the "black box" of Chinese politics. In authoritarian systems, opacity is the rule. Decisions are made by a small circle of leaders, and dissent is subsequently buried. Yet here, in remarkable detail, competing voices are revealed.

Zhao Ziyang stood almost alone in advocating for dialogue and compromise, warning that repression would alienate the people and undermine reform. He was

subsequently purged, placed under house arrest, and silenced for the rest of his life. Li Peng and Yang Shangkun urged the imposition of martial law, while Deng Xiaoping exercised decisive influence, framing the protests as a fundamental threat to socialism itself.

For readers, the reports illustrate how authoritarian governments view legitimacy: not as public approval but as stability. Authorities repeatedly summoned the spectre of "chaos" (luan), seeing in the students not simply idealistic young people but the seeds of revolution. Their alarms were partly justified, as the demonstrations had developed into a social movement involving workers and citizens. Yet the leap from protest to "counterrevolution" shows the rigid ideological lens through which the Party viewed dissent.

The book's greatest strength is its immediacy. Reading minutes of meetings and transcripts of secret conversations among leaders creates a striking sense of proximity to power. The editors deserve credit for contextualising the documents, offering explanations and cross-references without overwhelming the narrative.

It also captures critical historical junctures. While the Tiananmen crackdown ultimately occurred, the documents reveal a series of crossroads: moments when dialogue might have prevailed, when compromise was almost within reach.

The book has not escaped scrutiny. Questions were raised about the authenticity of the documents, given that their sources remained anonymous. While many experts have accepted their credibility, the lack of verifiability remains a limitation.

Another shortcoming is the absence of student voices. The documents focus on Party leaders, making the book heavily elite-centred. We do not hear from the students, workers or citizens who occupied Tiananmen Square. Their experiences must instead be sought in memoirs, journalistic reports and oral histories. Readers should therefore treat the book as only half the story: the view from the top, not from below.

Accessibility is also an issue. At times the documents are repetitive and bureaucratic, which may daunt readers unfamiliar with Chinese politics. References to committees and protocols add to the density. Yet perseverance is worthwhile: once immersed, readers gain a rare education in the language and psychology of authoritarianism.

Finally, the book implicitly valorises democracy, reform and individual freedom as "good." This frames the narrative as a "missed opportunity for democratisation," a view that aligns with Western notions of progress but does not necessarily reflect China's own political trajectory.

The significance of The Tiananmen Papers in 2025 lies, first, in the fact that the documents it contains continue to shape China's politics. The Party has successfully erased Tiananmen from public memory, ensuring younger generations have little or no access to information about it. Yet the legacy of mass protest, the obsession with stability and discipline, and the intolerance of dissent remain hallmarks of Chinese governance.

Second, the book illuminates the nature of authoritarian governments beyond China. Across the world, such regimes confront protests and movements demanding accountability and freedom. The politics of the Tiananmen massacre, and the calculations of Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues — deciding when to compromise and when to repress — resemble dynamics seen elsewhere, from Moscow to Tehran. Reading these clandestine documents is to witness authoritarian logic at work, in real time.

Lastly, the book reminds us of the fragility

of reform. Zhao Ziyang's voice is haunting because it represents a road not taken. His downfall symbolises the closure of China's brief window of political openness during the 1980s. Today, as China extends its global influence, it is worth remembering how contested its path once was.

Although scholarly in substance, The Tiananmen Papers is not scholarly in tone. Nathan and Link intended it for a general readership, and their annotations make it accessible. Nevertheless, the density of information demands patience. It may be most useful for readers to approach the book step by step, following events chronologically rather than attempting to read it cover to cover in a single sitting.

The Tiananmen Papers is not just a book but an archive of history. Its contents expose the way authoritarian leaders think, fear and make decisions. It is essential reading for students of Chinese politics, authoritarianism and the vulnerabilities of democracy. While limited by questions of authenticity, elite bias and density, it remains a path-breaking publication, unrivalled in its power to penetrate the veil of secrecy surrounding the Chinese state.

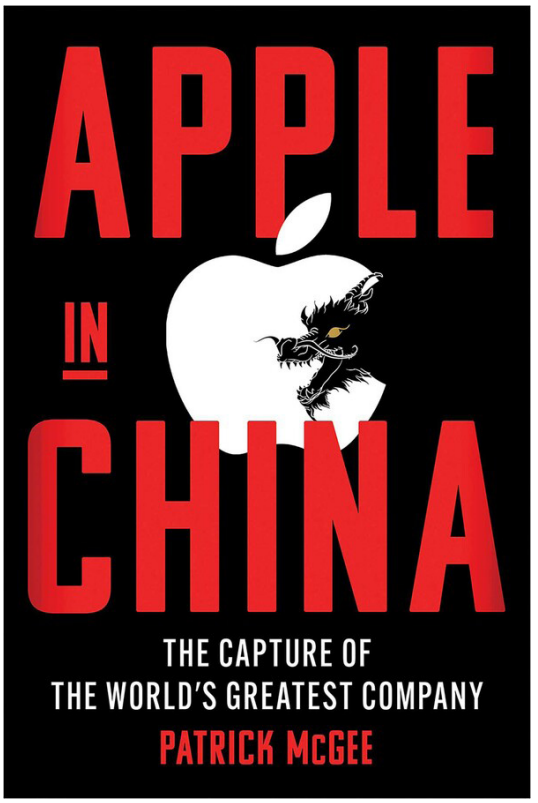
For those who want to understand how regimes legitimise repression, and how voices of reform are silenced, this book is indispensable. It is not easy reading, but it is required reading. ■

book review.

Vidisha Madan

> *"Quite simply, you don't get to do business in China today without doing exactly what the Chinese government wants you to do. Period. No one is immune. No one."*
>
> Doug Guthrie, quoted in Patrick McGee, Apple in China, p. 348.

Patrick McGee's Apple in China is less about Apple's history and more about geopolitical tensions in the contemporary world. The book tells the story about how the world's most famous and prized company built itself into a well-oiled manufacturing and design machine, putting all its eggs into one basket - China. It also explains how Apple has become so intertwined with a political system that has absolutely no interest in adopting liberal ways of governance. McGee argues that this is a story of triumph but with a deep sense of vulnerability. Apple and China's relationship is mutually beneficial. By the mid-2000s Apple had understood that the level of production and efficiency it wanted to achieve was not possible in the US or Europe. China offered exactly what Apple wanted; efficiency, speed and large-scale production. Cheap labour was important, but not as much as building an entire ecosystem of supplies, skilled workers and engineers and logistical hubs that allowed Apple to work at a speed no rival could. McGee documents how China became the backbone of manufacturing Apple products with both Steve Jobs and Tim Cook pushing for partnerships.



Apple in China: The Capture of the World's Greatest Company by Patrick McGee, Simon & Schuster, 2025

Numbers convey how important China is for Apple. Apple invested a staggering $275 billion into China between 2016 and 2021. According to McGee, this number is more than twice the value of the Marshall plan after being adjusted for inflation. McGee goes a step forward and calls Apple's investment a 'Marshall Plan for China'. The Marshall Plan was a programme initiated by the United States to rehabilitate the economies of European countries, to promote democratic values and to contain the influence of the Soviet Union. In short, it had clear geopolitical intentions and plans. On the other hand, Apple's investment in China was purely motivated by profit

and were private corporate investments. Equating the two is unjust and it is extremely difficult to blend a geopolitical issue with a corporate motivation. This melodramatic comparison distracts the reader from the fair and logical argument that McGee is trying to make: Apple's investment for China was revolutionary and transformational, somewhere overstating Apple's uniqueness in China.

Foxconn remains at the heart of McGee's book. Foxconn, a Taiwanese manufacturing company has now become synonymous with producing iPhones. McGee's book shines when he is reporting and explaining the world of these production campuses in China, workers' dorms, working conditions and hours and the sheer logistical organisation required to build a new iPhone from prototype to launch in only a few weeks. Foxconn became Apple's most important partner in production and manufacturing. Apple did not simply hire Foxconn to make their products, it immersed itself in China and within an industrial ecosystem kept alive and subsidised by the Chinese state. Provincial governments and the Central government provided tax breaks, land, looser regulations and rules, infrastructure and the most important, migration of labour. The consequence was not just profit but also the transfer of knowledge. Millions of Chinese workers were trained by Apple which reshaped manufacturing standards in the country. McGee argues that this transformation helped China climb and lead the technology ladder and compete with rivals. However, Apple's relationship with China is not just about Foxconn. McGee explains how Apple accelerated the growth of Shenzhen into one of the most dynamic industrial clusters. The city was originally designated as a Special Economic Zone by Deng Xiaoping in 1980. Once a small fishing village, the city became a dense network of suppliers, logistical hubs and trained engineers, all located in the same place to service Apple's needs. The region's industrial policy was shaped by Apple's demands of efficiency, scale and production. Shenzhen was not only hosting Apple's production, it was transformed by it and created lasting impacts for China as a whole. It took decades of state planning and investments to create what Shenzhen is today. This explains why India and Vietnam, though they are getting a small sliver of Apple's supply chain, cannot recreate the Chinese model in the short run.

This transformation of China has a human side that is not ignored in this book. McGee reviews the surge of suicides at Foxconn in 2010, when a group of young workers killed themselves in protest against intolerable working conditions. Apple was forced into damage control mode and suicide nets were installed outside Foxconn dormitories. A number of surface level practices were conducted such as audits, reports about codes of conduct and supplier responsibility, but McGee argues how these practices could not fundamentally change a system built on intense pressure, long working hours and a demand for speed. Apple's image as a global, high value brand clashes with the grim reality of workers that make their products. McGee reminds the reader that behind every shiny new iPhone is a human cost, borne disproportionately by migrant labourers with little voice of their own.

The political outcomes of this relationship are most concerning. McGee reveals that Apple created a 'Gang of Eight' to manage its problems with China. Their primary responsibility was to predict Chinese leaderships' demands, fix problems and ensure Apple complied with any of the shifting regulations. The list of concessions provided by Apple is long and tells the reader of the political consequences of doing business in China. It accepted the government's demand to store users' iCloud data on state servers and stopped any kind of features that clashed with Chinese security

laws. These decisions can be justified in terms of profit and market point of view but it largely tells the reader how Apple's decisions are shaped by the demands of an authoritarian regime. The formation of the 'Gang of Eight' indicates that Apple was using its own form of corporate diplomacy and tells the reader how a private corporation can have its own foreign policy to deal with situations in an authoritarian context. This political dependency became more prominent when Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. Xi consolidated power and emphasised reducing reliance on foreign firms while regaining full control over domestic operations. This left Apple with very little room to move around. With Xi's control over the state, regulations have become tighter, censorship has increased and the state has more authority over foreign firms. What started out as a mutually beneficial relationship became lopsided under Xi's regime with Apple at the shorter end of the stick. This situation is not without its irony and McGee understands that well. Apple, which was once seen as a flagbearer of innovation, empowerment and modernisation has now become embedded in surviving in an authoritarian regime. Instead of bringing China closer to liberalisation, which the United States hoped to do many years ago, Apple has contributed to the longevity of the system by providing capital, training and knowledge transfer.

McGee also effectively explains how this dependency on China restricts Apple from diversifying. To escape tariffs and political tensions, Apple could fully shift operations and diversify to India and Vietnam but it would not be able to replicate overnight the complex web of suppliers, logistical operations and the industrial efficiency available in China. Thus, this reliance is not just about cost but also about operational possibility. To make matters worse, rising Chinese firms, some of which were born out of Apple's intricate supply and manufacturing system are now directly competing with Apple. One of the most important competitors, Huawei, which was once weakened by sanctions from the United States government has made a strong comeback. Like others, it has also taken advantage of the Chinese supply chain that Apple once helped strengthen and has been able to reclaim the market share in the premium smartphone market. Huawei remains the most high-profile example but it definitely is not alone. Oppo, Xiaomi and Vivo also took advantage of Apple's supply chain model. They made use and benefitted from access to the same trained workforce, logistical hubs and supplier base that Apple relied on. McGee uses these examples to argue that Apple's success contained the seeds of its vulnerability. In trying to secure the most efficient production system in the world, it nurtured an ecosystem that could produce capable competitors. China is not just Apple's factory, it is also one of the most important consumer markets. McGee points out that Apple's growth in China heavily depends on the middle class that sees the iPhone as a status symbol. This dependence on the Chinese consumer market gives Beijing an upper hand and makes Apple more vulnerable to political leverage. If a wave of national boycotts or crackdowns hit Apple, it could lose a huge percent of its consumer base. In this sense, Apple is at a double disadvantage, it needs China to make its products as well as buy them.

Apple's hardware needs are fulfilled by the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), they produce the advanced chips for iPhones, iPads and Macs. This partnership between TSMC and Apple adds another layer of risk for the latter as according to McGee, disruption of any kind, be it a military conflict, political coercion or sanctions would be disastrous not only for Apple but for the entire technology industry around the world. Apple now finds itself caught in a strategic paradox by being reliant on a mainland system it cannot get out of

and on an island that could witness military conflict and takeover at any given point. Xi Jinping's repeated demand on 'reunification' with Taiwan, alongside the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army, makes the dependency even more risky. It is also important to note that Taiwan lies on the most dangerous geopolitical fault line in the world, making it one of the most volatile regions in the world. For a company that wants to control every last detail of its supply chain, its future is one full of risks and dangers.

Making the situation more complex is the broader United States - China power struggle that Apple finds itself in the middle of. As Washington imposes export sanctions on advanced semiconductors, bans sales of certain chips to Chinese firms and debates bans and restrictions on Chinese apps like TikTok, Apple must constantly navigate and negotiate between its home country and the government of its most important market. McGee notes that many times, Apple is caught in the crossfire, the United States puts pressure on it to reduce its exposure to China, while China hints that Apple could be punished if the United States escalates sanctions. The book explains how Apple has been reduced to a pawn in the larger contest for technological supremacy which is a position no corporation or firm, no matter how wealthy, can manage. Apple's dilemmas have therefore taken a geopolitical turn: how to remain profitable in China without betraying the commitments it made to the United States and how to reassure United States policymakers that doing business and depending on China does not pose a threat to its national security.

The book however has its flaws. The Marshall Plan comparison as noted above, is more distracting than informative. At other times, McGee also gives Apple the credit for China's rapid industrial rise. Other giants like Samsung, Siemens and Volkswagen, to name a few, have also contributed immensely to China's rise which cannot be credited to Apple alone. The book's narrative also seems heavily tilted towards the western corporate perspective. As compared to Apple insiders, the voices of Chinese migrants and policymakers are less prominent, a limitation that narrows the scope. If a reader is reading this book to find out how countries and governments manage such companies and dependencies, they will find less guidance than expected. Nevertheless, these flaws do not take away from the book's central contribution. McGee does a tremendous job of weaving together human and corporate stories and geopolitical context which forces the reader to understand how one of the most admired companies in the world is slowly becoming exposed. The entanglement of China's rise and Apple's success is now posing massive strategic risks. Global supply chains which were earlier created to make Apple's production more efficient have led to risky dependencies. Despite being secretive, corporate diplomacy or the formation of the 'Gang of Eight' has tied Apple into the political space of an authoritarian regime. Even the transfer of knowledge has led to the rise of rivals capable enough to cut into Apple's market share.

McGee's writing is that of an investigative journalist. His writing is direct, accessible and full of anecdotes showing his experience of years reporting for the Financial Times. He particularly shines at taking the abstractions of geopolitics and grounding them in the lived realities of factory floors, executive negotiations and state demands. The book will appeal to those who want to understand what goes behind manufacturing their iPhones and what it tells them about the global world order. For analysts and policymakers, this book offers evidence and insight about globalisation, industrial strategy and the limits of corporate independence in authoritarian systems.

In the end, Apple in China is less about Apple and more about the structural realities of the world order in the 21st century. It

is about the risk of assuming that private companies are shielded from geopolitical risks and threats. Xi Jinping's China is definitely not the one Apple entered years ago, it has become more authoritative and controlling with Taiwan being Apple's reason for survival. McGee's book does serve as a warning but also provokes to think differently. For policymakers, Apple in China is an advisory about state-corporate dependencies. It reminds governments that corporations, however powerful, cannot be relied upon when national interests clash with corporate motives. For India, which is actively trying to get Apple and other global manufacturers to shift its production, the book offers both opportunity and risk. Building an ecosystem that can rival Shenzhen will take years and unless governments plan for resilience, they may find themselves hostage to the very firms they want to attract. For the United States and Europe, McGee's reporting reinforces the need to build semiconductor resilience, diversifying supply chains and rethinking the assumption that trade automatically produces political liberalisation. McGee also situates Apple within China's bigger industrial ambitions. The trained and skilled labour, networks and efficient production methods that Apple introduced have helped advance state initiatives such as 'Made in China 2025', which aims to upgrade the country from a low-cost assembly hub to one of high value innovation. Instead of pulling China into the United States led liberal order, Apple has become one of the most important driving forces of China's technological ascent. The question is not only how Apple handles its dependencies but also how states and governments should respond to these insecurities when one of the most powerful and admirable firms in the world is intertwined with the most powerful authoritarian regime of our time. The answer to this question is not easy, but thanks to McGee, it is a question no one can ignore. ■

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